# Econo Clash

## Review

## Quality Cheap Thrills

## #FOUR

J.D. Graves, Editor-in-Chief

Copyright © 2019 EconoClash Review

All rights reserved.

Published by THRILLHILL BOTTOM PRESS

ECONOCLASH REVIEW #FOUR
ISBN: 9781091794153

THESE ARE WORKS OF FICTION. NAMES, PLACES, EVENTS, CHARACTERS, CORPORATIONS, INSTITUTIONS, or LOCALES IN THE WORKS ARE EITHER THE PRODUCT OF THE AUTHOR'S IMAGINATION OR USED FICTIOUSLY. THE RESEMBLANCE OF ANY CHARACTER, TO ACTUAL PERSONS (LIVING OR DEAD) IS ENTIRELY COINCIDENTAL.

Each author retains the copyright to their stories and artwork.

Cover & Story Art by Duane Crockett

Denny Marshall drew the story art for
SERVICE OF SUNFLOWER PLANET

Please support the authors/artists we advertise…WE DO!

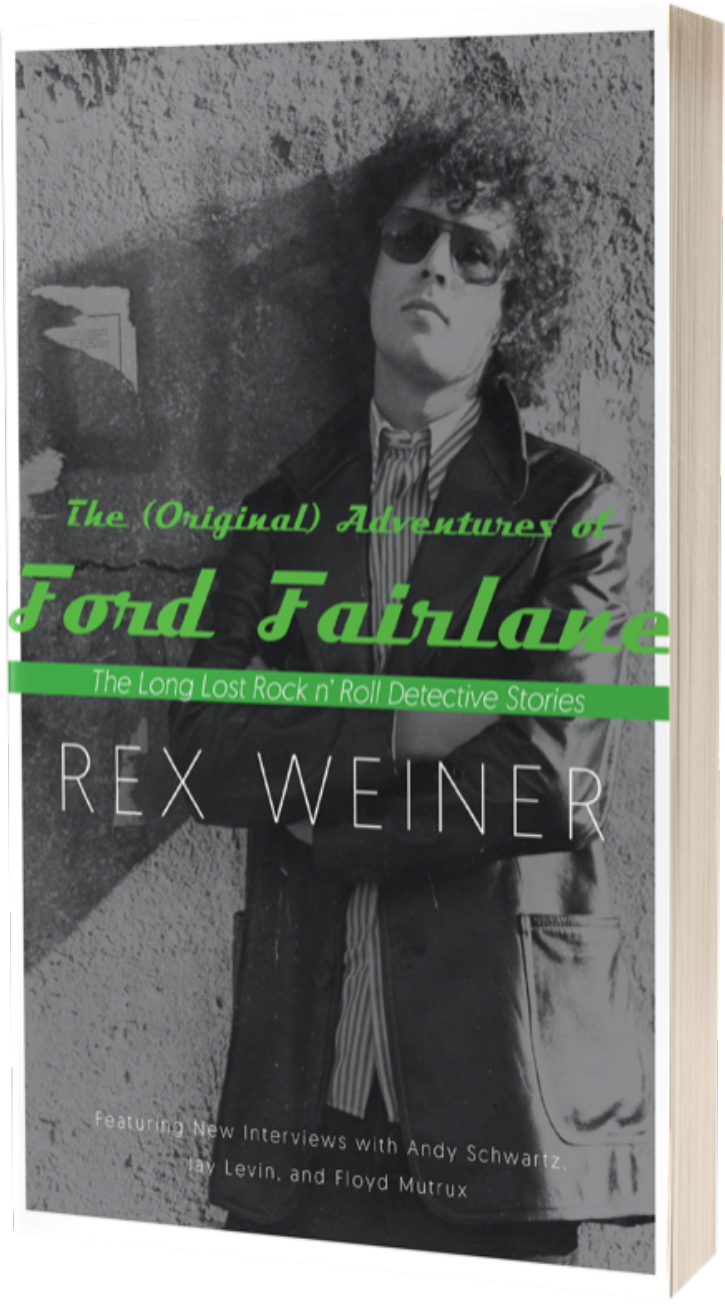
NO PART OF THIS BOOK MAY BE REPRODUCED OR TRANSMITTED IN ANY FORM WITHOUT PRIOR WRITTEN APPROVAL OF THE AUTHORS.

SPRING 2019
ECONO CLASH review #4
QUALITY CHEAP THRILLS
REX WEINER
A.B. PATTERSON
MARK SLADE
C.W. BLACKWELL
MATTHEW X. GOMEZ
JON ZELAZNY
HAILEY PIPER
J.S. ROGERS
ROBERT PETYO
J.L. BOEKENSTEIN
HATEBREAKER
EDITED BY:
J.D. GRAVES

# THRILL ORDER


| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | **Welcome Thrill Seekers** | i |
| 1 | ***Death Episode*** Rex Weiner<br>Crime | 1 |
| 2 | ***Hello Scum*** Matthew X. Gomez<br>Cyberpunk/Noir | 16 |
| 3 | ***Chicken Foot Blues*** Mark Slade<br>Transgressive/Noir | 32 |
| 4 | ***What Stills The Heart*** Hailey Piper<br>Horror | 41 |
| 5 | ***Freak Out!*** Jon Zelazny<br>Historical Crime | 50 |
| 6 | ***Bad Junk*** C.W. Blackwell<br>Crime | 70 |
| 7 | ***In the Blood*** Robert Petyo<br>Mystery | 87 |
| 8 | ***Stone of Souls*** J.S. Rogers<br>Fantasy | 105 |
| 9 | ***Service At Sunflower Planet*** J.L. Boekestein<br>Fantasy | 119 |
| 10 | ***The Eldritch Muse*** Hatebreaker<br>Horror | 133 |
| 11 | ***Blue Angel*** A.B. Patterson<br>Transgressive/Fantasy | 140 |

CHEAP THRILL BIOS


The (Original) Adventures of
Ford Fairlane
The Long Lost Rock n' Roll Detective Stories
REX WEINER
Featuring New Interviews with Andy Schwartz,
Jay Levin, and Floyd Mutrux

# WELCOME THRILL SEEKERS

I once had a kid boss who called a meeting on my day off. Seems he was going through some things and wanted to dare someone to cross him. I personally couldn't believe this little skivvy stain got the promotion. But he'd trained all the previous managers and whined to the GM about getting constantly skipped over. So, they threw the sixteen year old a bone. Wisdom comes with years of experience--but he didn't know it yet. For about two months he was cock of the walk--he earned that fat quarter cent raise, scored keys to all the doors, and landed his first girlfriend. A roly-poly little bat-faced girl who worked concessions. One of my favorite days working there came when they got discovered after business hours canoodling late into the morning. Both of them--fired on the spot. I only bring it up because ECR #4 is overstuffed with enough quality schadenfreude to keep you turning pages to the end. We have the great underground scribe Rex Weiner leading the charge. Our favorite Aussie Ex-Cop A.B. Patterson closes the show with a raw bit of fancy. In between, we got our pulp brother Matthew X. Gomez teaches the punks to cyber, Mark Slade plays the blues, Hailey Piper falls down a hole, Jon Zelazny asks Who Are You? 2019's seemingly ubiquitous C.W. Blackwell goes camping for crime, One of our Fav's Robert Petyo digs into some hellish DNA, J.S. Rogers brings us Orcs and a Damsel causing some major distress, J.L. Boekestein buries us in the graveyard dirt of the future, and Hatebreaker uncovers some truth--Old Ones style.

We've got butt shots, cyber-punks, Voodoo weirdos, Rock-n-Roll History lessons, Strange last rituals, Old One Violence, Transgressive vice squad fantasy, and much more.

Strap yourself in Thrill Seeker—We'll be back with Issue Five in due time!

—J.D. Graves

# DEATH EPISODE

## Rex Weiner

Willie stepped out of the shower soaking wet. Donna handed him a towel. He stood still while she taped a fresh bandage to the bullet wound in his left buttock. He wasn't looking out the window or he might have seen a figure in a lopsided wig standing by the driveway with a pistol. The bullet crashed through the glass and entered Willie's skull, as the coroner would later note, by way of his left nostril, ricocheting inside the cranium until it came to rest in the frontal lobe.

Donna looked up at Willie. She thought she'd heard kids on the street blowing off an M-80. Willie was holding his face, blood seeping through his fingers. He motioned her to get down on the floor. She crawled towards the kitchen. She looked back once to see Willie on his knees. In the kitchen she dialed 9-1-1.

"He's been shot again!" said Donna.

Sheriff's Deputy Skull Snyder forced his car off the Harbor Freeway over the city line into a neighborhood he didn't like. The map was covered with neighborhoods he didn't like. This one, about fifty square blocks stretching from a concrete trough wishfully called Compton Creek East to the dry cement ditch of the Los Angeles River, wasn't the worst. But it was 1975, ten years since they'd called out the National Guard to keep the city from burning down to the ground, and many parts of LA were still unloved.

He drove by lots where children poked through piles of garbage. Window-high weeds surrounded bankrupt stores. Freight cars rusted on side spurs beside the blackened ribs of arsoned warehouses. Spray-canned wall writing claimed turf in the names of gangs, subgroups and splinters of Crips and Bloods, MS13 and other crews, whose members lurked in houses pressed close together on streets where lawns and trees had long ago given up the ghost.

On one of these streets, three black-and-whites stood parked at odd angles, lights blinking. People clustered by the curb, released from morning routines by the spectacle of a neighbor's misfortune. From the yellow-taped cordon they stared at the lanky, crew-cut cop in the Brooks Brothers suit as he left his car and walked slowly to the house. Snyder imagined they would have been entertained to know that he had a headache.

Collona and Fields were questioning a female in the living room. Petroski and Velez stood by the corpse in the bathroom while Jerry Frank snapped photos from a variety of angles. The victim lay on his back, nude. Petroski, reckoning on a notepad the geometry of death, described how the dead man's head pointed east, hands outstretched above, and blood-smeared palms facing up. The left leg crossed over the right. The injury appeared in the face, just to the left of the moustache. The warped linoleum floor curled beneath a puddle of blood congealing around fragments of teeth and glass.

Sighting through a hole in the west window, Snyder ascertained the bullet's direction and trajectory. He could see the driveway. An easy shot. But not a random one.

Snyder went outside, taking off his jacket and rolling up his sleeves. He kneeled on the asphalt with the neighbors' eyes upon him. He knew they were staring at the tattoo on his arm—a screaming skull with the scales of justice clenched between its jaws—as he plucked a 9mm casing out of the dirt. He also raked together some cut up bits of a Polaroid photograph, tucking them into an envelope he carried in his back pocket for just this purpose, before returning to the house.

Collona was asking about the first shooting incident. Donna Vasquez said it happened a week ago in the living room. Willie had gotten up to change the TV channel. A shot came through the window and nicked his hand, hit him in the butt, then smashed the TV set. Snyder looked at the broken Quasar. Expensive set, probably hot. He watched Fields dig

around inside the splinters and come up with a 9mm slug.

Donna told about the phone calls. Willie was getting phone calls all day, all night, for the last four weeks. He'd had to change his phone number but whoever it was found out and kept calling. Willie would never say who it was—at first she thought he was seeing some other woman, the jealous kind. But Willie said there was no other woman and she believed him. Then after the first shooting, Donna picked up the phone and a guy told her, "This isn't the worst. The worst is yet to come."

While Donna cried and the coroner's investigator carted Willie Mendoza out the door, Snyder picked a paper bag off the table. The contents jangled. Silverware, junk jewelry, foreign coins looking like they'd been pried out of some kid's collection. Though he didn't care much about the death of a petty thief, less about the crying girl, it was his job as a homicide investigator to rescue some truth from this place of headaches and nightmares, as twisted as that truth would prove to be.

In his Temple Street office, Snyder spread the pieces of the Polaroid on his desk and puzzled them together. The photo showed two guys in blue work shirts sitting around an overexposed lawn. The building behind them was three stories tall and had bars on all the windows. Snyder recognized D Wing of San Quentin. One of the guys was a baby-faced Anglo with a snaggle-toothed grin. The other guy's face was missing.

Snyder dredged up the rap sheet on Willie. It was seven pages long. The last of the incarcerations, a year at San Quentin on a burglary, Willie had been a model prisoner. The parole board cut him loose on his second bid. A phone call to that institution revealed that Willie's cellmate at San Quentin was Joseph Vincent Smathers, released four weeks ago.

Snyder hauled out the rap sheet on Smathers. It was four pages long. First entry, 1967, when Joey was fifteen: six month's probation for disturbing the peace in his hometown of Barstow. Followed by stolen vehicles, petty thefts, burglaries, along with dismissals, short stays in youth farms, and about four years' worth of light treatment from a lenient society. Then came assault with a deadly weapon, kidnapping, attempts to influence witnesses, possession of dangerous drugs, escapes, burglary with prior felony conviction, parole violations leading to three years served of a one-to-fifteen year sentence in San Quentin. The mug shot showed a baby-faced 23-year old with a snaggle-toothed grin.

Smathers was the kind of guy cops categorize under "asshole." That is, someone who's habitually in trouble for stupid things. Assholes are always unpredictable, although generally not dangerous, unless cornered. In Snyder's experience, they could also be surprisingly complex personalities. You never knew. But it was just plain foolish to underestimate anybody in this field of study, especially assholes like Joey Smathers.

He had a home address in Barstow as well as a mother living nearby. Snyder put in a call to the Barstow police. Then he got into his car and took a

drive out to the desert. The hour-and-a-half trip didn't help his headache.

When he arrived at the address on 8th Street, a SWAT team was already in place. Guys in black watch caps holding M-16's, 12-gauge shotguns, and at least one M-5 tactical crouched behind cars and in doorways surrounding the two-story beige apartment building. The lieutenant in charge was a pock-faced man named Quarles. Snyder found him commanding his troops from an alleyway behind a dumpster that trash collectors had ignored for maybe a month. A fiftyish-looking woman stood by, shifting from one foot to the other and holding wadded-up tissues to her nose, either soaking up tears or blocking out the smell of rotting garbage, or both. Swatting away flies, Quarles said, "Meet the guy's mother."

"Joey called a week ago," she said in a voice pinched with anxiety. She was a heavy-set five-two, wearing shorts, a Disneyland t-shirt, and flip flops. "He told me he'd shot a man in LA. Joey said he'd kill himself before he was gonna let any police take him."

Quarles pointed up at the second floor. Two officers carrying shotguns inched on hands and knees towards Apartment 2H. Quarles lifted his hand-held loudspeaker and, complying with Section 844 of the Penal Code, advised Smathers that they had a search warrant and to open the door now. There was no reply. He let Smathers' mom have a try, handing her the bullhorn.

"It's me, Joey," she squawked out. "Your mother!"

Her plea went unanswered.

"That's his vehicle over there," said Quarles, pointing to a green Toyota Celica. "The hood was

warm when we got here. We also found this." He pulled a blond bouffant-styled wig out of an evidence bag. "Has a girl with him."

Snyder took the wig in his hands. Flies went for it like a piece of meat.

"Your son have brown hair?"

The mother nodded.

Snyder said, "He's alone, if he's in there."

"How you know that?" said Quarles, scratching at a fly bite.

Snyder scraped the wig's inside mesh and held up a short strand of brown hair stuck to his fingernail.

"I don't get it," said Quarles, who was one of those men who, in most other ways excellent, lacked a certain amount of imagination.

Snyder watched the officers simultaneously smash the front and side apartment windows with their gun barrels, tossing a stun grenade inside. After the flash bang, when there was no response, they rammed the door.

The mother gnawed her knuckles and moaned. Snyder felt her pain, with the certainty there was more coming.

Walking through Smathers' empty apartment, Snyder stopped at the sink to gobble two aspirins from a Bayer bottle he kept in his pocket and gulp water from the faucet. It continued to drip when he turned it off. He stared down at the pile of unwashed dishes covered with roaches nourished by the leaky faucet, the smiley face sticker on the refrigerator that said "Have A Good One."

He flinched at the sudden caress of déjà vu, resisting the familiarity with which ordinary objects called out to him. These things he had seen before,

bare mattresses and abandoned clothes, the stereo and favorite records scattered across the floor, Formica table and earnest chairs, the coffee cup with the cigarette inside, drowned in the wake of yet another fugitive life.

If Snyder felt fear at all, it was now, as witness to a hundred and one scenes where the bare bulb burned too brightly, a cigarette moldering in every coffee cup, and one more stale room with a leaky faucet where your soul warped like dirty linoleum under a slow drip.

"Found these," a Barstow cop said. In his hand were two empty pill bottles. The label said Desoxyn. On the street they called the yellow barrels "Sox." Smathers was a speed freak.

"Look at this," Quarles said. He flicked a tiny piece of shiny paper onto the Formica table.

Snyder reached into his pocket for the envelope, dumping the contents on the table. Quarles watched him assemble the scissored bits of paper like a little jigsaw puzzle until they formed a Polaroid photograph of two guys sitting on a lawn. Snyder took Quarles' piece and fit it in. It was Willie Mendoza's face.

"Who's that?" said Quarles.

"My dead," said Snyder.

"What's it all about?" asked Quarles, pointing to the now-completed Polaroid of the snaggle-toothed Joey Smathers with his arm around Willie.

"Love," Snyder replied.

Quarles watched the cop from LA walk away. He'd heard about him. What he'd heard about Snyder he couldn't remember. But it was something kooky.

In any case, the suspect in Apartment 2H had gotten away, and the Barstow police department had other things to do.

The warrants for Joey Smathers' arrest lay on dozens of desks around the county for over a year while Snyder attended to the business of the LA County Sheriff's Homicide Department. The fatal attraction between the petty thief and his cellmate took a backseat to suicides, wife killings, gang shootings, murders by assailant or assailants unknown. The usual run of cases. The routine went uninterrupted until the day in March when Snyder got the magic phone call from Federal Border Patrol.

A unit stationed on I-8 out near El Centro was watching the road for illegal alien transports. They clocked a 1974 Cadillac with Arizona plates heading east at 90 miles per hour, riding low. It matched smuggler profiles describing the frequent use of older, wide-body models. As the car shot by the parked patrol car, the agents observed a Latino passenger in the front seat. The agents saw the Latino look first at them, then turn sharply to the driver. The Caddy slowed to 50mph. The Border Patrol Unit swung out onto the road and fell in behind the suspect vehicle. They were running a full check on the plate number, smugglers index and NCIC, when the Caddy veered off an exit ramp and stopped by the side of the desert road. The agents hadn't even turned their red flasher on.

A tall Anglo got out of the Caddy holding a map and walked back to where the agents had pulled over. He said he was lost. He asked for directions to the

town of Needles. When asked where he was traveling from, the man stated Albuquerque. The map he held in hands said "Cleveland and Environs." He said his name was Wilson. The Latino in the Caddy said his name was Leon Rosario, from Denver, but had no ID as he and his friend had been robbed by a hitchhiker, and their wallets were gone.

Agents observed, however, a large amount of property in the car, including expensive stereo equipment, a couple of TV sets, and a stack of videocassettes. The two suspects then stated they were low on gas and asked for the nearest service station. Agents directed them to a place two miles up the road and meanwhile radioed for assistance.

At the gas station, the suspects emerged from the car with weapons and proceeded to hold the gas station attendant hostage for fifty-three minutes until flushed from the building with tear gas. Ten police units were engaged in the assault. Further investigation revealed the gunmen to be Joseph Vincent Smathers and a robbery suspect named Jose Luis Romero, whom Joey had bailed out of Bakersfield jail. Both were now in custody in El Centro.

"I don't tell you nothing."

Snyder wanted to knock Romero's head against the cell wall. The business card from the Dennison Mortuary and the purchase order for a green and white mobile home parked in space #15 at the Orbison Trailer Park in Bakersfield, among other curious items found in Smathers' possession, brought no explanation from either of the two prisoners.

Snyder motioned for the El Centro cop to let him out of Romero's cell. Snyder walked out and turned downstairs. In cell A7 stood Joey Smathers. He was gabbing with a prisoner in cell A8. Joey grinned at Snyder and waved.

"I didn't do nothing," said Joey, flashing his snaggle-toothed grin.

The guy in the next cell laughed.

Snyder left El Centro Jail and went across the street to a lunch counter. He ordered a coffee and sat. Joey Smathers and Jose Romero had enough charges against them to keep the El Centro court busy for a couple of years. The problem was putting some kind of heat on the LA murder charge, which would take precedence if it was prosecutable. Right now, all Snyder had was a "suspicion of…" But if somebody started talking, then Snyder could get his murder solved. That's all he cared about. And a second cup, black.

A man and a woman entered the luncheonette. They slid into a nearby booth and began to talk. The voices rose and fell in the rhythm of recrimination and denial. A lovers' quarrel.

Snyder listened in. He heard the woman say, "I saw you with her, isn't that enough?" It caused the man to slam his fist down on the table. Snyder got up and left a dollar tip on the counter. He walked back across the street to the El Centro Jail with an idea.

Romero shook his head and laughed. "What are you trying to do, man?"

Snyder shrugged. "I don't know," he said. "Just passing along some information."

"The guy's a homo, man. I don't care what he does."

Snyder looked up at the El Centro cop. The cop nodded, cuffs ready. He unlocked Romero's cell.

"C'mon," Snyder said. "Let's go say hello to Joey."

They walked downstairs, Romero in handcuffs. They stopped in front of a glass windowed door. Snyder peeked through.

"Just like I told you," he said.

Romero looked through the window. He saw two guys making out in cell A8. One of them was Joey Smathers. Romero stepped back, looking away.

"Two homos, so what?"

"One wanted to get together with the other. We said no. Unless."

"Unless what?"

"Unless Joey told us who burgled all that stuff in the back of the car."

"He told you it was me?"

"All you."

Romero looked again through the glass at cell A8, this time with bitterness.

"Joey's got a thing for locked up guys," he said. Then he kicked the door and screamed, "Joey, you god damn!"

They dragged Romero back upstairs to the interrogation room. When he was through cursing, he told Snyder to get out the notebook. He had something to say.

"I'll tell you about that murder in LA, man. And something else, too, about Joey, you ain't gonna believe it."

Skull Snyder didn't have to call the Dennison Mortuary in Bakersfield, but he did. They confirmed that a young man fitting Smathers' description (but calling himself Joseph Matthews) had been in their employ a few months back. He'd been fired for going AWOL one night with a company hearse.

Skull Snyder didn't have to take the trip out to Pacific Crest Cemetery in Redondo Beach, either. But he went. A guard walked him over to William Mendoza's burial site. In front of the grey marble tombstone ("Missing you Willie") the grass sagged about three inches lower than the surrounding lawn. Snyder tested it with his tip of his shoe.

"Sometimes it settles that way," shrugged the guard.

Snyder asked if there was a night watchman. The guard showed him the watchman's shack, over a hill, about half a mile away, beyond sight range of William Mendoza's sagging grave.

These details Snyder collected just in case the things that Jose Romero confessed to him were a fantasy. If the story Romero told him was a lie, then Snyder could at least trace Smathers' movements since he'd disappeared a year ago. But the headache he'd had in the beginning of this case returned as Snyder drove his car into the Orbison Trailer Park on the outskirts of Bakersfield. The pain slithering beneath his scalp like a snake blurred the line between fantasy and fact.

He showed his badge to the woman who waddled out of the manager's office. Her eyes peered from behind greasy glasses at the LA cop who walked

down the dirt road between the trailers, and the Bakersfield cops who followed him. She would have been entertained to know Snyder had a headache.

The trailer in space #15 was a green and white, 20-foot Fleetwood. One of the Bakersfield cops forced the door. Snyder stepped inside. The odor was faint at first. Then he saw the tape on the air vents. One of the Bakersfield cops snapped a photograph of the tape.

Snyder stood in the kitchen of Joey Smathers' last home and once again felt the awful pull of ordinary things—the hardware store calendar on the wall with dates circled, a plastic-wrapped hanger full of dry cleaning hooked on the back of a chair, a jar of pennies on the window ledge.

The odor permeated the bedroom, made worse by a half-dozen lilac-scented Airwick Stickups dotting the wall. Snyder watched one of the Bakersfield cops run his hand along a wall seam behind the bed. The sound, when he thumped his first against it, was hollow. The cop went back to the car for a tire iron. When he returned, they peeled away the wallboard.

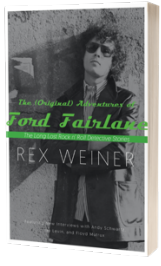
Impervious to smell, Snyder approached the white casket stashed behind the wall while the others gagged. He nodded to the Bakersfield cop, who flipped back the lid. Inside lay Willie Mendoza, sleeping the sleep of the ages beside the bed where Joey had slept, whose love of locked-up men had brought his old cellmate here. Part of Willie's head was caved in, wriggling white maggots having a field day. The Bakersfield cop ran out and vomited.

Joey Smathers' reward for Mendoza's murder was to be sentenced for twenty-five years to life in

prison with a lot of other locked up guys, plus six months for the crime of grave-robbing.

Skull Snyder's reward was one more file cleared from his desk, plus a recurring visit nightly to a room where the bare bulb burned above a coffin in which lay a corpse, the face on the corpse invariably his own.

Copyright © 2019 REX WEINER




Before the movie about a rock n' roll detective there were Rex Weiner's noirish stories, capturing the punk rock 1970s in New York and Los Angeles in all their gritty glory. First published in the *New York Rocker* and the *LA Weekly* in 1979-1980, the stories became the basis for the 20th Century Fox motion picture starring Andrew Dice Clay. From CBGBs, the Mudd Club, and Tier 3 in NYC to the Starwood, Zero Zero and Cuckoo's Nest in LA, Ford Fairlane takes you back to a sexy, violent and explosively creative time and place that live on in rock 'n' roll legend, brought authentically to life in these hardboiled stories.

Order now from Rare Bird Books
www.rarebirdbooks.com

With Tom Waits-like prose, you'll be out hipped."
—**John Densmore**, The Doors

# HELLO SCUM

## Matthew X. Gomez

"Hello, scum."

Tremblay looked up from the digital display projected out onto the stained table in front of him. A quick gesture and it was off. Bloodshot eyes stared at the two men looming over him.

"Officer Barlow. And…? Sorry I don't think we've met." Tremblay kept his hands on the table, acutely aware of the attention this was drawing. Dive bar like this, most everyone kept to themselves, but police rolling up obvious was always cause for concern. He saw T'Anna take a step closer, but he put her off with a quick two finger slide. She went back to staring at her phone.

"It's Detective Barlow now, asshole. This is Detective Gravis." Barlow leaned down on the table, his right arm a skeletal metal appendage the same flat

black as the 11mm pistol on his hip. Gravis didn't sport any obvious artificial limbs, but his eyes gleamed the blue of lab-grown sapphires.

Tremblay leaned back and nodded. "Okay, okay, so congrats on the promotion. Sorry I didn't get the memo. Next time you come by I'll have something nice for you."

"I don't want shit from you, maggot." Barlow smiled, teeth too even and perfect for someone on a city police salary, even with a detective bump. But then Barlow was crooked as the day was long.

"So? This a social call? I'm flattered."

Gravis' lip curled up in a snarl, but he kept his mouth shut. Barlow was alpha in this relationship and Gravis was there to... what? Scare him?

Barlow shook his head as he stood back up. "Like I want to be seen with you, Tremblay." He reached back and Tremblay waited for the gun to come out, waited for the bullet engraved with his name, but out came Barlow's phone instead. He pressed a few buttons and Tremblay's phone beeped.

"Check it out."

Tremblay brought the display back up, felt the bile rise in his mouth. There in high definition a dead body portrayed. Young. Male. Naked. An addict based on the track marks on the arms and legs. Tremblay rotated the image, zoomed in closer on the display. Cause of death most likely from the bullet that entered the back of the head and exploded out the front.

"Execution?" Tremblay asked.

"That's the current theory. Dead boy there went by Beetle. Real name Davon Mountjoy. Huh. I'd

probably go by something else too. You recognize him?"

Tremblay nodded. "Never saw him naked, and never, well, never with his face pasted against a wall. But yeah, I knew him. Joy boy. Had a mouth that liked to run before his brain caught up. Can't say I'm surprised."

"Not sad to see him cut down in the flower of his youth?"

Tremblay banged his hand down on the table. "I said I wasn't surprised, not that I wasn't sad. Yeah, I'm sad that he ended up like that. Just not surprised is all. Why are you dumping this on me? Think I had something to do with it?"

"Nah," Barlow replied. "We know you, Tremblay. You're a low level pusher and grifter, but murder's not your style. We found this on him though." He reached into his pocket and placed a square tab on the table, disrupting the image of the dead body. Tremblay recognized it as a contact patch designed for quick drug delivery. Medical professionals typically had them on hand as emergency pain relief among other things. Certain unscrupulous folk used them to deliver more illegal substances to their clients. This particular one bore a cartoon depiction of a white rabbit.

"You know what this is." It wasn't a question.

"Yeah."

"Found it behind his ear."

Tremblay frowned. If that was true, it would be in evidence. Gravis and Tremblay out here with it like this, someone was trying to aim a gun. But at who? Beetle was what? Collateral damage most likely. A message that you could help the police, or you'd share

his fate. Start with someone low in the food chain, give it a good shake to see what else came out. Tremblay didn't pretend he was important enough to be in the crosshairs, but he knew Gravis and Barlow wouldn't blink as they pressed his face into the concrete if it got them the results they wanted.

"What was on it?"

Barlow shrugged. "Meth analog, probably. Something designer. Geek squad in the lab is still trying to figure it out."

"Yeah, okay. How'd Beetle, sorry, Mountjoy afford something like that? Boy couldn't even afford regular meth, let alone something special." Tremblay kept to himself that Beetle preferred a different class of drug entirely. Downers, mostly, sometimes the occasional tab of molly. Meth of any kind would be outside his desired experience.

"Not our problem," Gravis replied. "Maybe he was acting as a guinea pig for a lab. And that's what we want. The lab. The pushers. Maybe it will even help us find out who killed him." Gravis tried a smile, but it was about as genuine as a prostitute's love for a client.

"So why come to me with this?"

Barlow rolled his eyes and sighed. "You're scum, Tremblay, just like I said. But you are useful scum. You know people. You say you don't recognize this, and I believe you. But I also know you can find out if you want to." He used one kielbasa-fat finger to push the patch along the table. "So find out. Could even be a finder fee in it for you."

"Be careful, Tremblay." Gravis tapped two fingers against the pistol under his jacket. "Don't want to end up like Mountjoy."

Tremblay watched as they left, his right eye twitching, feeling the sweat run down his back. They might not have flashed badges or shown up in uniform, but their entire bearing screamed police. And they had stood around and talked to him. No handcuffs. No conversation down town. Nothing he could spin to be anything more than the police talking to him. In public. They hadn't been particularly discreet with the contact patch, which meant whoever the manufacturer was would know the police were on their trail and that they'd coopted him into the search.

He finished his drink and packed up, folding his computer into his pocket, but leaving the contact patch behind. T'Anna raised a questioning eyebrow but he put her off with a shake of his head. Having her follow would cost him extra, and he barely made enough to have her cover him at the bar. His foot hit the pavement outside and he paused, the warm, humid air making taking a breath a chore after the artificially chilled air of the bar. He could run. He go to ground and wait for it blow over. He could find whoever was pushing the white rabbit and try and talk to them, let them now he wasn't working for the police.

Yeah.

He started walking, flicking his phone on. "Hey, Javar. Yeah, it's me. You free to meet?"

"I'm working on something, why?"

"This is important. Can't really talk about it. Meet me in an hour?"

Javar muttered something Tremblay couldn't quite hear. "Yeah, yeah. Where?"

"Tito's."

"Yeah, yeah, fine."

Tremblay buried his hands in his pockets as he turned and headed deeper into the burned out barrens of the city. Hollowed out husks of buildings cast long shadows as the sun dipped toward the horizon. City lights didn't come on in this part of town, bulbs knocked out by hurled concrete as bullets were too precious to waste on vandalism. Denizens of the city let him pass unhindered, content to wallow in their private deprivations. Cracks yawned wide in the sidewalk, and rats the size of small dogs watched with beady red eyes from behind poorly boarded up windows. The detritus of a part of the city the politicians hadn't gotten to yet. Tremblay heard muttering that some corporations were petitioning the city to clear out the barrens, push the residents out, and buy the land cheap. Nobody had made a move yet, but Tremblay figured it was only a matter of time.

He found himself standing outside a corner supermarket, long shuttered. The roll cage had been cut apart at some point, and he ducked inside. The inside had been picked clean, not even the shelves remaining, leaving an open space. A scorched part of the floor bore witness to where someone had squatted in the past. Tremblay was old enough to remember when the store had been open, a gathering place for the locals run by a hard ass Latino named Tito who brooked no nonsense but was ready with a laugh and a beer for the guys he liked. Of course that all ended when he caught a bullet. It wasn't even meant for him. After that, though? Yeah, no one wanted to use their connections to keep the place open. More revenue in drugs and booze and sex workers than in diapers and groceries.

Tremblay sat down, turning his phone off. It probably wasn't enough to drop off the grid, even for a small period of time, but it couldn't hurt.

Javar rolled in half an hour later, slipping into the grocery with a grace that always caught Tremblay by surprise.

"Brother, how goes it?" Javar rumbled.

"Like a fucking kidney stone. Beetle's dead."

"Shit. How?"

"Bullet to the brain pan."

Javar spat. "Ain't that a bitch. You know who the shooter is?"

"Got a couple of ideas, yeah. Couple of cops named Gravis and Barlow rolled up on me to talk about it. Dropped a patch with a white rabbit on it. Figure they're shaking the tree."

"Looking for Beetle's killer?"

"Nah. I figure one of them did it. No, they want whoever is making white rabbit. Could be they are cutting into the police's line of vice and they want it shut down."

"So. Why'd you call me?"

Tremblay smiled, a cold, hard line. "Because what I'm going to do, well, I can't do it alone. Are you in?"

Javar frowned. "I ain't got any love for the police, you know that. But a man's got to eat, right? And there's no profit in revenge."

Tremblay nodded. "Yeah, I hear you. But this works out, we'll both get paid."

Javar's frown faded a little. "Okay. Talk to me."

Tremblay gripped the railing as he went down to the basement door, concrete steps worn slick from years of customers walking down and stumbling back up. The woman at the door towered a head and half over him, her physique bulked out and swollen.

"Do you have an invitation?" A violet visor covered her eyes, the surgical marks still visible where it was grafted to her skin.

Tremblay flashed his phone. The woman scanned it and the electronic passkey was accepted. She grunted and knocked twice on the door. He heard a series of locks being drawn back, and the door opened.

Stepping inside he was bombarded by noise, a primal drum and bass assault that shook him to his bones. A young man, clad only in a kilt, skin covered in a withing neon tattoos, led him through twisting corridors. His guides' face was completely obscured by a gas mask. He got glimpses into other rooms, people lounging on mattresses and piles of rugs, clouds of smoke hanging around their heads, or dancing, gyrating to the music. He stepped over bodies passed out and hopefully no worse as he moved deeper.

His guide knocked on a door, pushed Tremblay in without an invitation. Inside it was quieter, and the air smelled almost fresh, instead of the stale recycled atmosphere so common in buildings. He caught a hint of cinnamon in the air.

A well-dressed woman sat behind a desk, midnight blue power suit and nails filed to points. The room was devoid of any other furniture, the room illuminated from a diffused source in the

ceiling. His guide stepped to one side, and leaned against the wall, crossing his arms over his chest.

"You are Tremblay." The woman's voice came out clipped. Mechanical.

"Never claimed otherwise, ahh…"

"Alice."

"Right. Alice. White rabbit. Got it."

"You have been asking questions."

"I'm a curious guy."

"Curiosity can get you killed."

"Maybe, but it hasn't yet."

"What did you want to know?"

Tremblay frowned. "I don't have any questions for you."

"So why are you here?"

"I've information to sell."

The woman paused, and Tremblay could almost hear the whir of machinery as she processed the information. "What do you think you know that I do not?"

"I know who wants to shut you down. Two detectives. Gravis and Barlow. They killed a junkie, went by Beetle. They want to pin it on you and yours, use it as an excuse to move in and sweep everything aside."

The woman steepled her fingers in front of her face. "And they told you all of this?"

Tremblay made a sound halfway between a cough and a laugh. "Not in so many words, but might as well." He held up the contact patch of the white rabbit between two fingers. "They gave me this. Said it was found on a dead joy boy. Implied that whoever made it might be behind the killing. But that didn't connect for me."

"And why is that?"

Tremblay frowned. "The kid didn't die from whatever was on this. Died from a bullet to the back of the head. So why try and tie it to this?" He slapped the patch on the desk, the white rabbit looking faded and worn. "Why bring me into this at all?"

The woman didn't take her eyes off of Tremblay, and he could feel the sweat pooling in the small of his back, soaking his shirt. "What did you decide?"

"They're using me," Tremblay replied. "Maybe I'm not the gun, but they're using me to aim the barrel. They killed someone I liked to grab my attention, to make me their tool."

"This makes you angry."

Tremblay nodded. "Yeah. And tired."

"And you think we will help you. Why? We could drop your lifeless body deep in the barrens and no one would be the wiser. No one would miss you."

Tremblay's mouth curled up and the lines around his eyes crinkled. "Oh, I'm not as easily forgotten as all that." The smile faded. "But even if that is true, they'd find someone else. No, what I recommend is nipping this in the bud."

"Assuming that we have anything to do with this white rabbit. Assuming we are the ones the police are coming for."

"Yeah, assuming that." Tremblay's shoulders slumped and he felt a wave of exhaustion crash over him, threatening to drag him to his knees. "But even if you aren't pushing white rabbit, how long do you think it's going to be before they're coming for you? They don't tolerate competition."

"So you have a plan?"

Tremblay smiled, wolf-like, teeth gleaming in the light.

***

Gravis and Barlow stood in the middle of the street, their car parked behind them, all rugged tires and armor plated. They'd traded the suits for black t-shirts and tactical pants, shoes for combat boots. Barlow's metal hand held a pistol while Gravis cradled a shotgun.

"Where the hell is he?" Barlow muttered.

"You think he pulled a runner?" Gravis asked.

Barlow shrugged. "Wait, there he is."

Tremblay stepped out of the alley, Javar trailing behind and to his left, looming large over him.

"Who's this?" Barlow asked.

"Evening detectives. This is Javar, my associate."

Gravis wrinkled his nose like he smelled dog shit and Barlow hawked and spat. "We don't care who he is, do we Gravis?"

"Nah, we don't. What we care about is if you've got something for us."

Tremblay nodded. "You going to pay me?"

Barlow smiled and raised the pistol.

Tremblay frowned. "Guess not. What you want is in a warehouse. Two blocks south, four blocks west. Can't miss it, it's the only building on the block."

"Good," Gravis replied. "You can show us exactly where it is. And to be sure, your associate can join us."

Tremblay's frown deepened. But he kept his mouth shut.

"Climb in," Barlow said.

Tremblay climbed into the back of the car, noticing how cramped it was due to the amount of gear shoehorned in. Javar had it worse, tilting his head far to one side in order to accommodate his size.

"Guess it's a good thing it isn't far," Tremblay said.

"We could always handcuff him to the bumper and make him run to keep up," Barlow offered.

"I'm good," Javar growled.

The short drive took them to the warehouse. Lights could be seen streaming through the frosted glass windows.

"Looks like someone's home," Barlow commented. He exited the vehicle along with Gravis. They let Javar and Barlow out, and led them to the side of the building, Gravis trailing behind. The police had slipped on ballistic vests.

"The door's locked," Tremblay said.

"Is it?" Barlow gripped the handle with his artificial hand and pushed and twisted, the door giving way with the scream of metal rending.

"Good thing we aren't trying to be quiet, huh?" Tremblay asked. Javar tried and failed to stifle a chuckle which earned him a disapproving look from Barlow.

Inside the warehouse, long tables were arranged with lab equipment, scales and wrapped packages. There weren't any people around, but from the look of it there had been people their recently. Catwalks crisscrossed overhead and there was the low hum of running machinery.

"Guess you knew what you were talking about," Barlow said. "Gravis..."

Whatever he was going to say next was cut off when he hit the ground, grabbing his leg a faction of a second before a gun shot rang out. Gravis spun, looking for the shooter, but missed seeing Javar's fist coming for the side of his head. He went down hard, fumbling with the shotgun, but Javar pried it from his hand, slamming the butt against the side of his head for good measure.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck!" Barlow grabbed at his wounded leg, blood spurting from between his fingers. He reached for his pistol but Tremblay kicked it away.

Two figures came down from the catwalk, one of them carrying a scoped rifle. The other stood half a head shorter than Tremblay, her hair shorn close to the skull and a pair of bright pink goggles fixed to her face, an earpiece resting in her ear. A digital display ran across the lenses.

"These the two?"

Tremblay nodded. "Yes. Their car's outside. One of them should have the key to it. Looked like it had quite a bit of gear inside so I'd strip it before you ditch it."

"Yeah, yeah, we know how it goes. Lady said to give you this." The one with the goggles flipped a plastic card to Tremblay who snatched it out of the air.

"Come on," Tremblay said to Javar. "Let's get this broken up and I'll pay you."

After they left the warehouse, Javar turned to Tremblay. "Not that I'm complaining, but what about Mountjoy? You're going to let his death go like that?"

Tremblay frowned. "There wasn't a damn thing I could do about him, was there? He was dead when he

woke up that morning, he just didn't know it yet." He held up the card he'd been given. "But we can have a few drinks in his name, keep the lights on a bit longer, and the world is going to be greater for the two assholes about to leave it."

"Yeah, well, you better be buying those drinks out of your cut is all I'm saying," Javar replied.

Tremblay smiled. "Okay."

They walked out in the barrens, while behind them the local gangers came out to scavenge the car. By morning there would be no sign of it or Barlow and Gravis. The police would stage a manhunt for show, shake down the locals. No one would remember seeing them or hearing their names. It would get filed as a cold case.

And the city would go on.

Copyright © 2019 Matthew X. Gomez

# CHICKEN FOOT BLUES

## Mark Slade

A tall, pale man in a black trench coat and black crumpled, fedora, looked down at the park bench and saw the book with a discolored cover, lying there, unattended. It was open to a certain page. A pen looked like it had rolled to the right, almost fallen off the bench. The man picked up the book, then realized it was a diary. He cradled the book in both hands, turned the pages gingerly, and found the beginning of the diary entry for that day. He briefly folded the book over a hand to read the words on the cover.

The man read aloud: "Diary of one Evelina Giles: Witch." His brow narrowed and the man pursed his lips. "Hmmph! Dear me. Isn't that something? A Witch in a college town like Augusta, Virginia? I shouldn't be surprised. Augusta University has some strange characters." Underneath those lines it read: "Anyone who reads this diary may become--"

The last written line was not legible. It was covered by a smudge.

The man Shrugged. He looked around to see if anyone, possibly the owner, was around. When he discovered the coast was clear, he decided to sit on the bench and read the diary.

Why not? He told himself. Why not sit and enjoy the rest of the day. It had stopped raining. He'd finished work at the office early and was on his way home. He had the rest of the day to himself. Laura was off visiting her sister for the night. It turned into a rather lovely spring day. So why not sit here and read a bit. "I might get a laugh out of this," he said. "After all," the man snickered. "Anyone who calls themselves a practicing witch in this time and day and records it in a diary, cannot be legit," he snickered again. "Can they?" The man asked the chirping birds in a tree above him. When they didn't answer, the man just shrugged and began to read the diary.

MARCH 22nd: I was asleep at my desk when the bells on my shop door chimed. I awoke quickly, raised my head up. I removed strands of my brown hair from my lips and cheek, and tried to smile. Through blurry eyes I saw an elderly woman with curly gray hair standing over top of me. She was in a blue dress that looked like her Sunday best and flat, square shoes that probably prevented pain in the balls of her feet. But someone should had told the old woman her stockings were hanging down at her knees.

"What are you going to do about this?" The old woman said. She removed a giant chicken foot from a plastic bag and dropped it on my desk. It landed with a bang and I jumped three feet in the air.

"Well..." I touched it slightly with a finger. "What would you like me to do?" I pushed the chicken foot away from me in disgust. "I-uh-am not really in the mood for chicken soup."

Mungo, my six foot-five assistant appeared in the doorway of my office, watching over the meeting. He had his usual sour look on his scarred face, keeping a close eye on the old woman. You never know who, or what, she really was. Especially walking into my office carrying a chicken foot.

"I want you to do whatever it takes to destroy this thing that is bringing me bad luck," the old woman said in a huff. She sat in an old rickety chair I keep forgetting to throw away.

"Why don't you just throw it away?" I asked.

"I do!" The old woman used her hands to illustrate wrapping it up and tossing it away. "But it keeps coming back!" At that point she noticed Mungo was in the threshold, lurking. The old woman stifled a scream with a hand. "Oh my God," she closed her eyes and fanned herself. "What in the world is he?"

"He's Mungo," I said. "My assistant. And you are...?"

"Lana Rupert."

"Okay, Miss Rupert. What can I do for you?" I asked as pleasantly as I could for being woken from my afternoon nap. Actually, I was cranky as hell. I felt my period coming on.

"Call me Lana."

'Okay, Lana," I said sarcastically. "What can I do for you?"

"You are a witch?"

I nodded.

"I want you to…destroy that thing, then," Lana pointed at the chicken foot.

"Miss-uh-Lana...how is this chicken foot bringing you bad luck? Sometimes…people believe--"

"No!" Lana beat her fist on my desk. It was surprising, because she didn't look like she had enough energy to point a finger. "My husband used to say silly things like what you were going to say. Regardless of whether it was in my mind or not, I want my normal life back."

"Okay," I said. "Where is Jack? Is he at home?"

"Yes," she said. "I have in a vase sitting on my mantle above the TV," Lana illustrated the statement with her hands. "Jack used to say I was too flighty. A little nutty. I admit in the seventies I followed whatever spiritual trend came along. I even joined a group that thought David Brenner was a God that fell from the Vortex. I learned my lesson."

"What lesson was that?"

"Not to follow anyone…no religion can make me happy. Only I can make me happy," Lana said. "Only…"

"Only what, Lana?" I cocked my head to one side.

"No one should delve into Voodoo!"

I agree with her on that. "What kind of bad luck are you experiencing?"

"A few days ago I was stuck in the bathroom. My bathroom would not open."

"The heat can make a door expand. Or--"

"In the middle of winter, Miss Giles?" Lana held up her hand. I stopped talking. "The weather has been very gloomy. The high has been thirty-one, at the most."

"Yeah," I nodded. "I suppose so. What else?"

"I nearly choked to death on spaghetti," Lana thought a second. Then blurted out: "I tripped on the stairs. See?" She held up her arm to show a very bad bruise which had now become purple just at the elbow. "Oh! My Biffy is sick."

"What's a Biffy?" My eyes shifted to Mungo, who was giving me the signal that he should make a special cup of tea for Lana to see if she was telling the truth. I nodded to him and Mungo disappeared.

"That's my dog, of course!" Lana cried out. She took a photo of a light brown Pomeranian from her purse and showed it to me.

"Of course," I said, rolled my eyes. "What's wrong with your doggie, lady?"

"He gets sick when the sun goes down. Its darndest thing. Only when the sun goes down. In the daytime he's fine."

"Sick how?" I inquired.

"Well…vomiting…shaking all over…glassy eyed…walks into walls. Like…well…he's stunned or something," Lana sighed, pleaded with God above with both hands. "I even took Biffy to the Vet."

"Yes. Except…"

"Except what?"

Mungo entered the office carrying a silver tray with my rusty kettle and a chipped cup. Mungo set the tray down on my desk. He poured the tea sloppily and offered the cup to Lana.

"Oh. Tea?" Lana pulled back, touched the front of her dress, as if he was accosting her.

"Yes," Mungo grunted. "My tea is the best in Augusta." Mungo played it for joke. Which it was. His

tea was terrible. Possibly the worst in world. But we had to make sure she wasn't lying about anything.

Lana took the cup and actually drank the tea like a trooper. She pulled away and smiled at Mungo.

"Oh..." She sounded as if she'd just had an orgasm for the first time in years. "Mr. Mungo…I believe this is the best tea I've ever had."

I looked at him incredulously. A huge grin crossed Mungo's face. He exited my office walking on cloud nine. Lana's face never lit up. An orange hue never flushed her cheeks or dashed her forehead.

She was telling the truth.

"What did the Vet say, Lana?" I was very curious now.

"He took some blood samples of Biffy," Lana said. A worried look crossed her face even recounting this. "Doctor Baker back in the waiting room and explained that before he became a Vet, that he'd volunteered to help a renowned Scientist in the field study of Island mythology of Magic. They discovered a certain fish in the Bahamas contained the same elements that can put a person in a deep coma. They witnessed drugged villagers walking around even after they'd been pronounced dead and been buried."

"Is that a fact?" I was fascinated. I leaned in to hear more, rested my chin on my hands, my elbow on my desk.

"Doctor Baker said Biffy had that drug in his blood system!" She finished with a scoff.

Biffy had become a Zombie-dog. I had to contain my laughter. "Okay," I said, biting my lips to keep from smiling. "I'll look into it. My fee is--" I was going to say three thousand dollars.

Lana opened her purse and took out a thin roll of twenties. She tossed it on my desk. "I have two hundred dollars," she declared. I was none too pleased with offer. She shrugged and said, "I can pay more when my social security check comes in."

I placed my head in my hand, then rubbed my forehead. "No, Lana. That's fine. Go on about you daily business. Mungo and I will look into this."

"Oh! Well, thank you, Miss Giles!" She scuttled out of my shop, beaming. The front door slammed behind her. The bells chimed the same time a migraine hit me.

Mungo appeared at my office door, his hands on his hips, disapproving.

"What?" I asked. I was annoyed by Lana, him, and my impetuousness.

"We have rent coming up--"

"I know we do!" I screamed, jumped out of my chair. "Come on! Let's solve this thing this afternoon!"

We went to Lana's neighborhood at around five that afternoon. Lana wasn't home yet, which was good. I wanted to see if anyone was pushing those chicken feet through her mail slot. The idea came to me after Mungo and I surveyed the neighborhood. Not many houses there in the cul-de-sac. Nine to be exact. Four on the left, five on the right. Lana lived at the end and was more than likely the first house built there.

Mungo and I checked Lana's trash can. Yesterday was Sunday, so there wasn't any trash pickup the past two days. There they were. Two chicken feet. One at

the bottom of the bag, one on top of the bag. Just as I thought. Someone, possibly a neighbor, was giving Lana the chicken feet when they notice the previous ones were thrown away. Lana thought it kept appearing in her house, and the bad luck never went away.

Mungo and I hung out in the front yard, behind a magnolia tree. My allergies were acting up because the rag weed and pollen everywhere. The dogwood was blooming, both white and pink flowers on trees across from each other, and her rose bushes were even growing. She had a nice yard. Made me wonder who kept it up for her. Her fence looked like it had a new coat of white paint and the grass was freshly cut.

We'd been there for an hour. Bored out of our minds, I sat down on the grass and laid my head against the magnolia tree. I sighed, closed my eyes. As I was drifting off, I thought about lying to Lana and taking her two hundred bucks. What the hell? She'd never know if we took the bad luck curse off or not--

"Evelina!" Mungo rattled me out of sleep. I quickly opened my eyes and saw his elongated finger pointing to the broken down green house across the street.

I saw Lana's Pomeranian hustling across the street with a chicken foot hanging from his mouth. Biffy's tail wagged in rapid succession like a flag caught in a windstorm. Right behind him was a very large black man chasing after him. They both avoided an SUV barreling around the corner. The SUV blasted its horn, but neither man nor dog was thrown off their track. They raced to Lana's house. Biffy was ready to zip through the doggy door when the giant man cupped him in both hands.

Biffy dropped the chicken foot and wiggled insanely in the man's grasp. The man couldn't hold on any longer and Biffy leapt to the ground. He took off like a rocket and snatched up the chicken foot between his little teeth again. The man reached out for Biffy. Mungo was right there to defend the little dog with two body blows, sending the man backwards. Biffy zipped through the doggy door, growling at anyone who dared to take his proud possession. Once inside the house, Biffy's machine gun bark told the strangers to leave his home at once.

I rushed to the front door and tried to open it. Caught up in the moment, I forgot Lana would not leave the house without locking her door. I got on my hands and knees and opened the doggy door. I saw the chicken foot just inside the threshold. My small hand fit perfect in the square hole, but my jagged wrist was caught and that little bastard Biffy started nipping at my fingers.

"Oww!" I screamed. "Stop that, you little punk!" I wiggled my hand free, deterred by growling sniffling little cur.

I turned my attention back to the fight to see the man was holding his own with Mungo. The man had delivered several punches to Mungo's face. Still, Mungo had fought his way back on top by letting the man rush him. Mungo picked the man up and body slammed him on walkway. I heard a shrill voice screeching for Mungo to stop. An elderly black lady was trotting away from that broken down green house, waving her arm hysterically.

That's when I noticed something about the giant black man.

He had no pupils in his eyes. Two milky black balls filled the white sockets. His face showed no expression, and no pain registered every time Mungo hit him. I'd seen it before in pictures in my books. The man was an Island Zombie.

"Mungo!" I called out. "Stop!"

He was ready to curb the man. Mungo had lifted his leg high. When he heard my voice, his boot halted in midair, falling short of the man's chin. The elderly black lady came running up, huffing and puffing.

"That's my son," She barely managed, trying to catch her breath.

"Looked like your son was going to crush Biffy," I told the woman.

"He wouldn't hurt Biffy!" I heard Lana say as she walked up in the yard.

"Biffy was in our yard again, Lana," the woman said. "He stole something else, I don't know what took. Anyway, Kyle was just trying to get it back. We were worried about Biffy."

"He took a chicken foot." I said flatly. "As a matter of fact, Lana, Biffy has been stealing chicken feet from…" I motioned toward the woman.

"Nell Smith," the woman answered. "That's my son Kyle."

"Why, Nell and I have been neighbors for twenty years. I remember the day Kyle moved in. Only five years ago and he's helped take care of my yard, house…as well as work nights. All this time, you were the one giving bad luck, Nell?"

"Mrs. Smith," I chuckled. "Why don't you tell Lana why you have those chicken feet, okay?"

"Kyle died five years ago," Nell said. "Terrible car accident in New York. I went there to bury him

when I saw a cousin of mine who practices this type of thing. I need the chicken feet to make the offering to the Gods for keeping Kyle here on Earth with me."

"Oh, Nell," Lana said, "Why didn't you tell me? Were such good friends," Lana hugged her. "You can tell me anything."

The man closed the diary. He made a face. "Hogwash," he declared. "No way could any of this be true!"

He wiped the cover with a hand and discovered the smudge on the last sentence was gone. He read out loud: "Anyone who reads this diary may become violently ill."

The man didn't have time to react. He dropped the diary and fell to his knees. His stomach bubbled up. He fell forward, his fedora fell to the ground. He screamed as vomit erupted from gaping mouth. This went on for a few minutes until he noticed a pair of black flats attached to legs attired in black tights. A young woman with honey-colored hair in a ponytail, wearing a white skirt and blouse, bent down and seized the diary.

"Thank you," she said. "I'll take this off your hands."

Copyright © 2019 Mark Slade

# WHAT STILLS THE HEART

## Hailey Piper

I hear your breathing. You awake? Maybe not. Maybe you are and you can't speak. Break your teeth? Lose your tongue, friend? Aye, I say friend. If I'm not alone in this darkness, then anyone here's got to be a friend. You can call me friend, too, if you ever find your voice. People stuck in these dark places, especially the brave, we got to stick together. Was that a sigh? I'll take it as an oath of friendship and I'll swear the same on this reeking pit. So long we're down here, alive, I'll call you friend.

Now if I might confide in you, friend, if we're to die, I'd like to tell what happened to me. I swear, I'd never have gone down that hole if I knew. That thing—she wants us in this darkness. You don't have to tell me differently. I know you aren't down here

seeking buried treasure. She put me here. I doubt you just fell down some farmer's well and found your way to me.

But let me tell mine first. It's three nights ago that Merry Mary bursts into the tavern and spoils a good evening. Are you local, friend? If not, I'll tell you, Merry Mary has been working these parts since before I was born. Half of us got half-brothers from her, I hear.

Some time ago, all that work bred a madness in her, so when she bursts in and says her husband-to-be came crawling out of a hole in the ground and dragged some cow into the dark, we all laughed. Can you blame me? Any of us? James O'Creery, he says, who does she think would wed her this week, and we laughed again.

You're wondering how she spoils it, her giving us all something to laugh over. I'll tell you. First she starts telling us this old tale about a lass and a lad who were about to be wed when a fire took the house where the men were teaching this lad to be a man. She lost father, brothers, betrothed. Family. Home. Had to turn to the brothel. Yes, it was Merry Mary, and you don't need me to say that this little story put the tavern lasses out of the mood for dancing and anything else akin to joy.

So James says to Mary, how would you recognize that lad after all these years and all these men, and Mary tells him that the lad's not aged a day. James laughs again. That was the last laugh the woman could stomach. I blinked and her nails are dug into James's face, and the rest of us, we're pulling her off. Mess of blood and skin and shrieking. A fine night pissed away. They locked up Merry Mary until dawn. They

wouldn't keep her any longer than that. Bad for business.

And to top it off, she was telling the truth.

Next night, we're helping Saltwater Dan clean up the place. If you're no local, I'll tell you, he runs that tavern and knows everyone's business. He tells me that morning a man came in begging for water. When he gets it and swallows a mouthful, he says to Dan that he'd just seen the devil crawl up from a hole in the earth and drag his mare into the dark.

So, Dan asks the man what sins the horse committed that the devil had to come up himself to collect her, and I'm sure he asked that with a laugh. The man looks Dan in the eye, sober as any man can be, and says the devil was after the rider, who barely got away. He'd known since his last war that his soul belonged to the devil, but never thought he'd see that villain coming.

I'm about to ask Dan what happened to the man when Old Jacob staggers in, his arms scratched to hell, his clothes in tatters. He's a regular, seen Merry Mary come in the night before. I ask him if he's had a bad run-in with her, but he starts weeping. Keeps saying bear, bear, bear. When we finally get him calmed down and put some liquid courage in his belly, he tells us what happened. That was the moment it came real, that we knew some wrong thing was happening in our village.

Old Jacob had been driving a wagon of two oxen, his daughter sitting beside him, when a bear came out of a hole and snatched the girl away. If you're not a local, I'll tell you, Old Jacob's got this fear of bears. Not like you're staring one down and you think you might hear the angels soon. No, just

the thought of them freezes him up like spit on a winter night, ever since he was lost in the woods as a lad and one little bear didn't take kindly to his presence. The man didn't go near the woods again. Always thought that bear would be waiting for him.

This one, it didn't wait. It reached onto the wagon and swept his little girl into its claws. We all thought by the look of him that Jacob was damn lucky to get away after scraping with that beast.

But that wasn't it. You see, friend, the bear never touched him. It couldn't. He wouldn't let it. He was so scared that he shrank back when it came at the wagon. He let his daughter be taken. All those scratches on his arms and rips in his clothes were his own doing as he sat outside that hole, trying to muster the courage to save his girl. There was no doing. Not by him.

Us, on the other hand, well, we get rightly mustered. You might think she was dead by the time Old Jacob got to us and you might be right, but you wouldn't have said it then. You don't have to be local to know the way we local men get, the right and wrong battling inside us tips to the side of right, long enough for us to care. By God, we get set to save Jacob's girl from whatever lurked in that hole, be it bear or devil or old Merry Mary's man.

Most of us.

Now, I'd swear on my mother's grave that I left the tavern with the others and walked to that damned crack in the ground, and I'd weep for my mother's soul a moment later, because I find myself sitting there like I hadn't moved. What about my rightness? I'd say it was hiding and my wickedness has eyes for sweet and pretty Prim. All the young red-blooded

men want her, but all of them go off now and I have her to myself for the night, laughing and dancing and drinking. You never saw so sweet a table dance as hers, all swirling hair and hands and legs a blur. You'd know if you were local.

I'd like to say it was the grandest night of my life, and it was until the next day came. Then I learned what went on in that hole.

They return to Saltwater Dan's, one at a time, at first. Men who can't say where they've been all night. Men who can't say anything. Then the rest come in a crowd, and friend, I'll never forget their eyes. Dead eyes, fearful eyes, eyes that won't open. These are men changed. I can't reminisce over my night with Prim when they've all seen such horrors.

None of them go to work that day and only Saltwater Dan minds the tavern that night. I could've courted Prim again and no one would've got in my way. Maybe I should have. But, no. I have to know.

Dan and I spend a good hour chattering about nothing before we get to the meat of what I want to hear, and when we get there, what I see isn't the face of Saltwater Dan. That's the face of a dying man. Still, I need to know. So I ask him what went on.

He tells me they climbed down the hole, into a tunnel, and it split a dozen ways. They stuck together, those men, and made sure to remember their way as they went farther and deeper. Then Dan saw it. The sea itself, leaking into the cave, filling its tunnels. He told me it wasn't the sea he sailed in his sailing days, no. This was the dark sea, the sea beneath the sea, that held all the horrors of an old world. He'd always feared it. Always, he said.

But that wasn't the worst of it. That old sea had

him panicked, while other men were screaming over all kinds of things—serpents, spiders, flames, dead lovers, dead parents, the devil, angels, cold earth.

Dan leans close, like he doesn't want no one else to hear, even though we're alone, and says there's no bear in that hole. No devil. Not Mary's man. It's not anything it looks like. And he takes my arm and says it isn't fear. It's whatever stills your heart, you hear?

And I believe him, even when he starts weeping. Especially when he starts weeping. Dan's never been a coward. He's been a man of iron since before I was born. Fought the English once when we were at war and three more times when we weren't. Something down there had slithered its way into his heart and broken his mettle. I was right to believe that.

That rightness that took the other men takes me this time. This is just last night, but I can hardly remember what it feels like to be brave. To have hope. To be stupid enough to take a torch, a dagger, a sword, and a musket, and follow the other men's tracks to that hole. A hole—that's a nice way to put it. More like a stab in the earth, the kind of slit you got to crawl into.

Well, friend, I crawl. I slide in my weapons and I slide myself in after. The tunnels are like Dan tells it, splitting themselves like my old nan's hair, but I see the men's tracks by torchlight. See them treading one way and scrabbling back, kicking over most of the first set. I get the feeling it doesn't matter which path I take. Whatever's with me owns its underworld and would find what trespassed. But it doesn't own me, I said then.

Every step takes me a little lower than the last. In time, I get a sense of what I might see. My old man

would be down in that darkness, I know. He'd made me too scared to stay home, so I took off when I was still a lad. Why do you think I kept the company of Merry Mary, Old Jacob, and Saltwater Dan? Those are all old folk, friend, and you don't need to be a local to figure that out. All their great deeds and memories were done before I was a wink in my father's eye.

I looked up to them, these old-timers, these barflies, like new parents. You could do a lot worse. So it makes sense to me that I'd see a lot worse when that thing in the hole wants me gone.

Only, it takes a while. I get the feeling I've been walking half the night before the ground levels out, past any tracks. The tunnels lead me deep, and when I say leading me, I don't mean it comes out to show me. I mean it doesn't come out, so I have to press on. If I let go that sense of rightness then, I can't never get it back, and then maybe it wouldn't drag no horse underground next. Maybe it'd be Prim. Or me. So you see, friend, there really isn't much choice.

Eventually, I do hear a sound, about two corner turns from where I stand. I make those turns and you won't believe what I saw. I tell you now, it was as Dan said. Stilled my heart. Stilled everything. I couldn't move.

I see the tavern. I see Prim, a barefoot lass turning and dancing on the tavern table, her skirts whirling in the wind. I hear stamping and clapping and a pipe player and a lute. Prim has those eyes on me. You must know the type. The kind a man always wants to see from a woman he's after.

This is far worse than showing me my father. It knows it, too. It knows that as much as I fear that

memory of the man, I'd strike him down. This? Prim? I'm frozen, like Mary had to be frozen. What can we do against the people we love? Dan had known this would happen. He tried to tell me that it wasn't just fear, but I wouldn't understand. Too full of drink and manliness and rightness. I have to run so I don't have to see her.

But then as I'm turning around, I remember those other men's tracks in the dirt and how they all had turned around. And I have one more thought—something so strong that it can pull a horse underground shouldn't need glamours and tricks. Something so strong should face me like a proper beast if it can't be killed. Unless, of course, it can be killed. No other reason to pose as what we fear, or worse, what we love.

I turn back and fix an eye on the thing, dancing and smiling, batting her eyes. Then up goes my musket and I pull the trigger. The ball of lead shoots out and sure as my voice is speaking to you now, it pops that thing's chest open. I swear it on my father's grave, may he be damned. Damned as I am.

The moment this Prim-looking thing drops off the table, the tavern comes alive around me. It's a glamour no more, but the real tavern, filled with men, women, serviced by Saltwater Dan. And there is Prim, bleeding out on the floor, drowning in her own blood. Not some old thing that looks like Prim. Real Prim. My Prim.

They think I turned mad or evil. Both, most likely. They stuff me down here, and here I am. When I got into that cave, I thought I might get stuck down there if I didn't turn and run. That the thing underground would put me in some pit there, a deep

hole within a hole, as full of old horrors as beneath Dan's sea. Never saw this coming. A dungeon. It's no fit place for a man, no offense intended.

Now, friend, because you seem a good friend and not likely to think me evil, you're probably wondering how such a mistake happened. How'd I end up in that tavern from the underground? Before I thought maybe I went with the men after all. Maybe, while they were seeing snakes and spiders and wicked seas, I was seeing a night with Prim, a day of work, and a night when I pretended to be brave. Maybe the thing that stilled my heart was murdering that sweet and pretty lass.

Maybe I'm in no dungeon, but down in that thing's hole with nothing but nightmares. And now I am still.

But I don't think that now. No, I think what it was down there couldn't borrow or dress in the looks of things. It had to be those things. When Old Jacob lost his daughter, he saw a bear. I'd wager if he had shot it, there would've been a dead bear. When I killed it, looking like Prim, I killed Prim.

And that man who lost his horse? The devil stilled his heart, and he would've fought the devil if he tried. Maybe that's the real thing under it all. Maybe it's the sea, like Saltwater Dan told me, older than sin and full of horrors. No matter the look, it's dead. Either that, or I'm a fool.

So that's my tale, the story of a stupid man and why he'll never see the sun again. That's enough on my end. I've heard plenty of your breathing, friend. If you got a tongue, use it. Tell me, how'd the devil drag you down in the dark?

Copyright © 2019 Hailey Piper

# FREAK OUT!

## Jon Zelazny

"You into that whole rock 'n roll scene, man?" his nervy cabbie wanted to know. Kit Lambert barely glanced up from his *Billboard Weekly*. "On occasion."

The driver gently applied the brakes. "See that Ford Falcon over there?" He slowed to a stop and his spiffy English passenger blinked out the window. They were on a Hollywood side street of apartment blocks that looked like every other Hollywood side street of apartment blocks. "Dig, that's the spot they found Bobby Fuller last year."

"Bobby Fuller?"

"Texas kid. 'I Fought the Law and the Law Won'?" The driver was broad-shouldered with short dark hair, aviator shades, and a cowboy hat. "He was in his car, all beat to hell and covered in gasoline. Cops figured the perps tried to torch the kid, then got

scared off maybe. Either way, say goodnight, Gracie."

Kit grunted. It was half past nine in the morning and he was still jet-lagged. He should have ordered a limo. No, this was Los Angeles: a stretch limo. "It's happenin' more and more, man." the cabbie went on. "I got a little theory about that."

Flicking his trade paper in the universally accepted sign for "Shut up and drive," Kit loosened his tie. September was unspeakably warm here and he'd yet to embrace the American obsession with air conditioning. The Hyatt on Sunset Boulevard—like every other hotel in this country—believed they could subvert nature's will by pumping blasts of arctic cold into his room at odd intervals. No wonder The Who were half-mad.

It was the thirty-two-year-old Kit's third trip to the U.S. in as many months. Most of his time was spent in New York, readying the American releases by Track Records' artists, and supporting The Who's first major tour, opening for the saccharine Herman's Hermits of all people.

Los Angeles was the first proper holiday Kit could recall since signing the band. He'd arrived two days earlier, skipped the show in Anaheim, and further passed on flying to Hawaii for the last night of the tour. Having packed the work tapes for the group's next single, "I Can See For Miles," Kit offered to start mastering while they flew back, then they could all finish it together at Gold Star, the Hollywood recording studio made famous by Phil Spector, The Beach Boys, and nearly every rock-and-roller in between.

"That's it," the cabbie announced. Kit glanced through the windshield at the stark windowless box a

block ahead. A saloon-style sign mounted on the second story presided over sidewalks pulsing with every known variety of human life.

"Fat guy flags me down here one night," the cabbie chuckled. "Turns out he's Orson Welles! Says to me, 'Motorman— ""

Suddenly, the cabbie slammed on his brakes. Kit flew forward and the back of the driver's seat smacked him square in the nose like a heavyweight fighter. Bellowing in pain, he sat back in astonishment. "Christ! You call that proper driving, you dozy sod?"

The cabbie was blowing his button hooter. "Get outta the street, jerk-off!"

Wiping his eyes, Kit found a boy standing directly before them. Seventeen perhaps, with matted blonde hair, a torn Madras shirt, and wild eyes. Lurching into the road, he froze as a passing Stingray nearly broadsided him.

"Goddamn acid freaks," the cabbie swore. "Hang on."

Opening his door, he stepped out and took hold of the youth. Kit sputtered in disbelief. Gold Star was fifty paces ahead; why was he sitting here? Still pressing his smarting nose, he groped for his briefcase, and got out. A tossed fiver on the front seat and he was fleeing the unpleasantness under the big blue road signs marking Santa Monica Boulevard and Vine Street.

Overall, he liked the City of Angels, though he found it a tad unnerving. A London sky was mostly clouds with rare interruptions of sunlight, while L.A. offered only an off-white blankness streaked by dramatic chemical pastels. People were everywhere,

but they drifted through the daytime haze like gestating insects, only emerging as individual identities after the fall of night.

Entering the main doors of Gold Star, Kit was greeted by another assault of cold air. The reception area was dimly lit. He fumbled toward the desk, gave the name of his assigned engineer, and the pretty girl picked up a telephone. As his pupils dilated, Kit took in the array of black and white photos lining the walls. Johnny Mercer. Chet Baker. Bobby Darin. The Ronettes, of course: Gold Star was renowned for her echo chambers, one of the secret ingredients in Phil Spector's Wall of Sound.

"Mr. Lambert? Brian Duncan." He turned to find a more clean-cut version of the sun-kissed hippie they'd nearly flattened. The technician looked him up and down. "Did you have your materials sent over?"

The question dribbled down through Kit's consciousness. "Bloody hell… my case! I left it in the taxi!" He tore back to the front door and outside, but it was too late. There wasn't a cab in sight. Mr. Duncan emerged behind him. "Gee, tough break, Mr. Lambert. Maybe we can call the company or something?"

Returning inside, Kit collapsed in an avocado-colored easy chair. "Gad! What a disaster." He needed a drink, or some pills. Luckily, he had his cough drop tin full of French blues in his suit coat. He choked back two and offered them to the younger man.

"I'm cool," the engineer grimaced. "What do you want to do?"

Kit eyed a courtesy telephone. "I've an old friend here," he remembered, digging into his briefcase for his address book. "She'll know what to do."

Track Records' former office girl Anya Butler was now Anya Hillman, having married one of the very same Byrds she once pooh-poohed. They lived as members of the pop aristocracy in nearby Laurel Canyon and she rolled up to Gold Star thirty minutes later in a sporty Alfa Romeo. The renowned London party girl had softened her posh accent and acquired a taste for turquoise jewelry but was otherwise as take-charge and efficient as Kit remembered. Phoning the Hyatt, she got the number of the cab company, placed a second call, and soon turned to Kit. "Who was your driver?"

"Some insipid chatterbox."

She returned to the call and hung up a minute later. "His name is Ray Driver."

"How ironic."

"He's headed back to the garage. It's ten blocks away. Shall we go meet him?"

"Do you know how much money I'm losing every minute we're not working?"

"No sweat, sir," Duncan offered. "I'll give you the time out of my lunch break."

"That's very kind. We shall endeavor to return as quickly as possible."

As the traffic signal changed to amber, Anya blithely wheeled around a Buick slowing in front of them and zipped through the intersection at a highly unsafe speed. "How are my favorite rockers," she asked fondly. "Should I believe everything I read?"

"Our best decision was sending them to Monterey. Between Hendrix and The Who, they're

calling Track Records the hottest independent label in the business."

"My husband hated Monterey. But The Byrds are dying a slow, painful death. I do hope he moves on. He's far too sensitive for all their petty viciousness."

"It's the nature of the beast, darling. Rock is not for the faint-hearted."

"Here 'tis." Jerking the wheel, she cut across two lanes of traffic, and thumped over the curb into a non-descript taxi yard. Inquiring at the office, they found a cock-up: the dispatcher had directed Mr. Driver back to LAX. He wouldn't return for another hour.

Kit moaned in dismay. Anya sighed. "Cup of tea, then?"

Wiping down the pleather booth with his handkerchief, Kit slid inside and surveyed the rest of The Gold Cup diner. Their fellow patrons appeared to be drunkards, tarts, and riff-raff, even more so than most Angelinos. He ordered the Breakfast Bonanza Plate for $1.98 but looked aghast when it arrived. "This is barbaric."

"It's as American as apple pie, darling. Try it with a little hot sauce."

He pushed it aside and studied her. "You like it here, don't you?"

"It's a fantastic place to be British. They worship us like gods."

"I had a taste last night; a little party thrown by some BAFTA chaps. All the boys around the pool were so blonde and fit, it was like holiday camp for the Hitler Youth."

"You could settle here, Kit. A little bungalow in the Hills surrounded by great hedges. No one notices a thing, and even when they do, they don't give a toss."

"The quiet life bores me. And we're on the verge of greatness. This single we're readying is our masterpiece. They'll be playing it when *Sgt. Pepper* is old and gray."

She raised a single bemused eyebrow. "You think so?"

Their crone of a waitress appeared. "How's everything here?"

"Deplorable." He looked to Anya. "Shall we?"

Ray Driver brightened at their approach. "Hey! Lord Nelson! Need a ride home?"

"No, in all the excitement this morning, I very stupidly left my case behind."

"Whoa, sorry 'bout that, brother. Let's take a look." He opened the rear door and inspected the back seat. "Nope. Nothing here."

"No, the case we stowed in the boot."

"We did what?"

"The trunk," Anya translated. "He means the trunk."

Ray removed his cowboy hat and scratched his head. "I don't think so." Fishing for his keys, he moved to open the lid, but aside from the spare tire, the space was bare.

"Kit, are you sure you didn't leave it in the room?"

The record man was growing distraught. "I gave it to him. He packed it."

"C'mon, man. You had a briefcase, which you definitely had when you took off."

"I had two cases with me. You packed the heavier one. Have you any idea what's in that case? It's absolutely irreplaceable!" He turned to Anya in mounting fury. "Would you be so kind as to ring the constabulary?"

The cabbie blanched. "Wait—what now?"

"The police," Anya clarified. "We're calling the police."

"Whoa, whoa. Hold up a minute," Ray pleaded.

Kit was trembling. "Well? Where is it?"

"Hey, gimme a break, man. Driving a hack in this town's a ball buster. Guy needs a little pick-me-up once in a while."

"Do go on."

"So I know this guy; he's usually holding. I run into him after I dropped you off and hit him up for some stuff. Only I'm broke, so he says, "Whattaya got for collateral?" I said, "You think I drive around with a trunk full of collateral?" Then I remembered there was something back there. I really had to score, man, so I showed him the goods. He took a look at all those tape reels and said we had a deal. I'm sorry, okay?"

"We need to find him. Immediately."

"Find him? I don't know where he hangs out." Kit shot Anya a nod. She started toward the office. Ray panicked. "C'mon, lady! I like you guys. You're strangers in a strange land and I wanna help you. But let's keep this between ourselves, huh?"

Mrs. Hillman relented. She and Kit reached some telepathic agreement and she addressed the cowboy icily. "You drive, Mr. Driver. And you'd better be

awfully fucking persuasive when we find your friend. What's his name?"

"They call him The Serb."

They set off for the downtown bar where Ray claimed he'd made the swap, but the calamity was starting to roil Kit's nerves. "I absolutely cannot lose those tapes! It's the greatest Who song ever recorded!" Anya patted his hand in sympathy.

As one neighborhood bled into the next, Ray seemed to forget his own duress and began indicating points of interest. "See that dump? That's where Sam Cooke bought it. He was having a good ol' time on the Strip one night, then for some reason he bops down here to jigtown with a couple hookers. Things got weird and one of 'em popped him with a .45. Cops figure it was a shakedown gone bad. Either way, say goodnight, Gracie.

"Tragic."

"He ain't alone. Y'dig how many recording artists are gettin' croaked these days? I got a little theory on that."

Anya rolled her neck. "Suppose you tell us more about this Serbian?"

"I dunno. Wheels 'n deals. Maybe what you'd call mob-affiliated."

They pulled up outside an establishment called Coachman's Cocktails. Ray disappeared inside and emerged triumphant five minutes later. "Bartender said our guy handles the books at The Palomino, and he's headed there tonight for sure."

"Where is that?"

"The Valley, man. Forty-five minutes; an hour

maybe?"

"This whole day's a write-off," Kit moaned. Then his jaw hardened with determination. "If this Serb fellow won't listen to reason, I'll wring his neck!"

They hit outgoing traffic on the 101 and sat dead still in a vast sea of cars. Feeling as though he were caught in the opening of *8 ½*, Kit tried to focus on the sunset, horizon-spanning tiers of day-glo violet and magenta. "Who else died?" he snapped.

"Huh?" Ray turned down the ballgame.

"You said pop stars are being killed. To whom were you referring?"

"You don't read the papers? Otis Redding and half his crew in a plane crash?"

"You're suggesting that was foul play?"

"I'm sayin' there's been lotsa 'accidents' lately. Lenny Bruce? 'ODs?'"

"I didn't realize he was a pop star."

"He made records, didn't he? That's what I'm talkin' about. What about Richard Farina, man? A motorcycle accident, mere fucking weeks after Bobby Dylan wipes out on his bike? I'm supposed to think that's a coincidence?"

"Only Dylan wasn't killed."

"How do you know, man? Nobody's seen him since!"

"Please stop," Anya begged. "You're giving me a migraine."

Night was rapidly falling when they reached the club, a blockhouse that had suffered multiple mismatched additions, with an honest-to-God posse of cowhands loitering about the entryway. A fierce

looking Mexican in a black leather vest glowered at them at the entry, but finally allowed them in. The main barroom was packed, a second room featured roughnecks huddled about billiard tables, and a cavernous third room featured a six-piece cowboy group playing as couples danced. His patience at an end, Kit seized Ray by the collar. "Where's your friend?"

Startled, the cabbie shook him loose, elbowed up to the bar, shouted back and forth with the barkeep, and elbowed back. "Up in the office." He led them across the room and up a roughhewn staircase to an open door. Inside, an outsized man in a lounge suit, gold chains, and spectacles was parked at a desk, hunt-and-pecking on a typewriter.

Ray cleared his throat.

The bookkeeper lifted his glasses. "Ray? What the fuck you doin' here?" He had two gold incisors, a bent nose, and an unfortunate hairpiece.

"Hey, man. That case I gave you this morning? This guy needs it back."

"What fucking case?"

"My name is Lambert," Kit broke in. "Those tapes are my intellectual property."

"No kiddin'? You with Track Records?"

"I *am* Track Records."

"Then this is your lucky day. I been writing you guys a little letter." He reviewed his work, cranked the page out of the typewriter, and handed it over.

*"To Whom it May Concern: The rehearsal tapes of "I Can See For My Miles" are in my possession. They will be returned to you upon my receipt of $5,000."*

A post office box address followed.

Kit looked up. "This is outrageous."

"Tell that to the dope who lost 'em."

"This letter constitutes proof of criminal extortion. Shall I ring for the police?"

"Knock yourself out. Only before you finish dialing, I'll be in my Polara heading for parts unknown. I'm like the wind, baby. Like a fuckin' samurai."

Ray and Anya looked to Kit as he mulled it over. "Alright. I'm willing to pay a finder's fee, but five thousand dollars is ludicrous. Why don't we say… a hundred?"

The crook whooped. "A hundred bucks? You gotta be shittin' me!"

"You've vastly overestimated the value of the tapes."

"I dunno. Somebody shelled out a lot of dough for all that studio time."

"Yes, but we recorded thirty new tracks and can only use ten on the record. Should we lose "I Can See For Miles," you're actually making my job easier."

"You're fulla shit, English. So the price just went up. Fifty-two hundred."

"Then I'm dropping my offer as well. Ninety."

"Ninety? Ninety what? Shillings?"

"Take it or leave it, Mr. Serb."

The man laughed. "You're a funny guy. Let's say… forty-seven hundred."

"Eighty dollars."

The thief looked in disbelief between his three guests. "What kind of negotiating is this? You're supposed to get closer, not further."

"Welcome to the record business," Kit snapped.

"All right… four grand. Last offer."

Kit folded his arms. "Fifty dollars."

"You're crazy, man. You think anybody in human fucking history ever recovered stolen property for fifty dollars? Tell him, Ray."

"Forty dollars." The man rose, his torso bulging, his fists clenched, but Kit didn't so much as flinch. "Sit down."

"You're starting to piss me off, buddy."

"If you don't sit down this instant, I shall further reduce my offer."

The Serb seethed. But sat. "Forty bucks don't even cover those pills Ray got."

Kit withdrew his billfold, counted out the four tens, and held them out.

The villain looked terribly unhappy. He seemed on the verge of taking the cash, but then considered Anya. "Y'know what, pal? Keep the dough. I'll take a piece of that."

Anya sneered. "Not bloody likely."

Kit's tone was equally withering. "Mrs. Hillman is a married woman."

The man leaned back, grinning. "Your call, King George. No broad, no tapes."

Kit stared daggers into him. "You, sir, are a scoundrel. Good day."

He motioned Anya and Ray out the door before him and closed it behind him. Once they reached the stairs however, he paused. "Oh, god. I feel faint. Five months work down the incinerator! Pete will positively explode."

"Don't the studios keep additional copies?"

Kit shook his head. "We'll have to give this rodent the entire five thousand."

Anya looked doubtful. "Are you sure?"

"It's either that or set the hotel on fire. Tell Pete

the tapes were consumed in the blaze. If lives are lost, he shan't quibble over a comparatively minor setback."

"I'm not sure arson is our best option."

"No, you're right." He sighed and turned back.

"You think he'll accept a check?"

"Wait, Kit." He turned to find her hesitating now. "I've an idea."

She brushed past him, knocked on the office door, and went in. Kit tiptoed closer.

"I've a counter-offer," he heard her inform the crook. "Would you agree to return the property in exchange for the greatest blowjob you've ever had in your life?"

"From you?"

"From a teenage runaway I've observed in action with some of the biggest rock stars in this town."

Chuckling, The Serb folded his arms. "This is getting interesting." He picked up the phone and set it on the far edge of the desk.

Anya consulted a little black book and dialed. "Derrick, it's Anya. Is Daphne still crashing with you? Splendid." She waited. "Hello, darling. We're at the Palomino and you'll never guess who's here: Jorma Kaukonen, from Jefferson Airplane! I told him you adore "Embryonic Journey," and he'd love to meet you! Yes, come straight on. Cheers."

She hung up and the hustler posed the obvious question. "What happens when she finds out I'm not the guy you said I am?"

"She's quite impressionable. And stoned off her gourd. She won't even notice."

"This I gotta see."

"We'll be downstairs."

Ray led the way. They were all famished and ordered supper at the bar, where the truckers and the kickers and the cowboy angels couldn't get enough of Anya's canyon chic, or Kit eating his chili bacon cheeseburger with a proper knife and fork.

Daphne appeared an hour later, an ethereal, rail-thin, and alarmingly vacant waif. Anya saved her from a pawing cowhand, steered her to the back stairs, and rejoined Kit.

"I say," he fretted. "This is all a bit tawdry, isn't it? I mean, even for us."

"You said it yourself, dear. Rock is not for the faint of heart."

The Serb joined them twenty minutes later. Breaking into a hideous grin, he handed Kit a plastic tackle box.

"I can give you her number," Anya offered.

"No need, Gorgeous. I'm splittin' for Big Sur, and she's comin' with me."

"Congratulations, Mr. Serb," Kit smiled. "We wish you every happiness."

"So that's it," Ray pleaded back in the cab. "We're square, right?"

"Square indeed, motorman."

"So? Back to the hotel?"

"Mrs. Hillman left her car at your depot."

"I'll fetch it in the morning, Kit. I want to go home. Laurel Canyon, Ray."

"Yes, ma'am."

Easing up a twisting mountain road, Anya stifled a yawn. "I told our houseguest I'd be back in an hour this morning. My husband's an amiable chap, but I'm sure he's had his fill of Frank Zappa."

"Frank Zappa? The Mothers of Invention? You know him?"

"You remember my friend Gail? She's bearing his child in a fortnight."

"Astounding. The man's a certifiable genius."

"Come in and say hello."

Ray looked back in concern. "Hey, man, I wanna drop you at the hotel and crash. I haven't slept in two days."

"Of course, Mr. Driver. I shan't be a minute."

Anya led the way inside a sprawling, yet comfy hillside estate. In a sunken TV room they found Anya's husband Chris and the visiting Mother Superior eating moon pies and watching *The Rat Patrol*. Anya made the introductions. Kit pumped the lanky, goateed star's hand. "I'm a tremendous fan of your group. And your astonishing debut!"

"Thanks. Care for a moon pie, Mr. Lambert?"

"Eh? No, no. I've had my fill of American cuisine."

Anya returned from the kitchen. "There's a good bottle of wine open, Kit."

"Ah! Now we're talking!"

He awoke in a guest room with a wistful smile the next morning and felt about for his clothes. What a tremendous evening! Fine wine and conversation, a crackling fire in the hearth, music and grass and soaks in the hot tub with a stream of lovely drop-in guests including Peter Fonda, Beach Boy Bruce Johnston, Catwoman Julie Newmar, hair guru Jay Sebring, and composer Andre Previn. Kit and Zappa hit it off in their mutual regard for Stravinsky, Charles Ives, and Eric Dolphy, but discussing great composers always put Kit in mind of his father. When he broke down weeping, the young Mr. Fonda threw a comforting arm around him. "Don't sweat it, brother. My old man's an asshole too."

Later, Kit got the distinct impression the statuesque Miss Newmar was coming on to him in the Jacuzzi: "Kit and Cat? We'd make the *purr*-fect pair!"

"What's the problem," he asked Anya in the kitchen after. "I'm not gay enough?"

"She knows, darling. She probably considers it a challenge."

Later still, the holdouts gathered on the high back deck for a mimosa-driven jam session and sing-along. Mr. Hillman and Zappa traded guitar licks, Johnston blew harp, Previn slapped bongos, and Kit stroked a guiro on favorites ranging from "The Yellow Rose of Texas" to "Strangers in the Night" to "Scarborough Fair." The sun rose and they ooh'd and aah'd like it was something miraculous, and come to think of it, it really was.

Once dressed, Kit found his way down to a

breakfast nook where he found Zappa perusing the morning paper over his cigarette and coffee.
"Lambert, did you call a cab?"

"A cab?"

"There's one sitting out there."

"What time is it?"

"Eleven thirty."

"Oh, Christ! I must be off. It's lovely to have met you, Frank. Have a wonderful tour." Flying out the door as he tied his tie, he found Ray sprawled across the front seat in deepest slumber, and shook him to.
"Gold Star Studios, man! We've no time to lose!"

He held on for dear life as Ray rocketed perilously down the winding canyon roads. Things finally leveled out when they hung a left on Sunset.
"I'd like to hear your little theory now."

Ray was still fuzzy. "Huh?"

"Who's killing all the pop stars?"

"Isn't it obvious, man? The record companies!"

"The record companies?"

"Think about it. They got these guys signed to contracts, right, only they're not doin' too good. What's the quickest way to drum up publicity? Die a tragic death. People read about it; they feel bad. "Gee, we never appreciated him." So they go buy some of the guy's records. Who profits? The record labels, the managers; all those blood-sucking, behind-the-scenes scumbags you never hear about. Makes sense, right?"

"I'll have to give that some thought."

"Yeah? Hey, what is it you do exactly, Mr. Lambert?"

"I own a record company. And manage a rock group."

Still preoccupied, he bustled into Gold Star's Studio B and found Brian Duncan pouring more coffee for the glowering Who guitarist and songwriter Pete Townshend.

"Good morning, dear boy! How was Hawaii?"

"I thought you said you was coming in yesterday?"

"Oh, it was far too lovely a day to spend cooped up in this dank little grotto."

Pete shook his head. "Some people have it dead easy. Where's our tapes, then?"

Kit looked down aghast at his empty hands. "Oh, fuck it all to hell…"

He spun on his heels and disappeared back out the door.

Copyright © 2019 Jon Zelazny

*"...a rollicking, rough-and-tumble whodunnit in the best tradition of Raymond Chandler and Dashiel Hammett."* **- G. Wayne Miller,** author of *Thunder Rise.*

Barry London is a Fixer by trade, lent out by his boss to other crime lords. He is sent to his hometown of Gemma City, New Jersey to deal with corrupt cops at war with each other over a missing video, dealing with an ex-girlfriend who happens to be a cop, the wife of a good friend who also wants to sleep with him, both looking to tame the wild and rough London. And if that wasn't, enough, London finds himself investigating several murders and the burning down of a nightclub. The key to it all is cracking the mystery of Mr. Zero.

AVAILABLE 31ST MAY 2019 FROM CLOSE2THEBONE.CO.UK

Page Count : 143
ISBN : 978-1-79856-748-7
Price : $6.99 Paperback & $2.99 Kindle
Publisher : Close To The Bone Publishing
Email : close2thebone@hotmail.com
Illustrated by Lissanne Lake

# BAD JUNK

## C.W. Blackwell

Jeanie awoke to the sound of a fly buzzing. The camping tent smelled of cooked junk and urine. Leaf litter on the mesh dome. Harv sat slackshouldered in a small lawn chair by her feet. His eyes were half-closed and his mouth slanted open.

"Baby," said Jeanie. She swiped her hand under her pillow looking for her phone. "Baby what time is it?"

Harv didn't reply.

The fly was now crawling over his chapped bottom lip. Small white eggs like tiny salt crystals nestled in the corner of his mouth.

Jeanie sat up and gave him a hard look.

"Harv," she said, this time a little louder. She kicked him with her leg still inside the sleeping bag, harder than she intended. Harv tipped sideways and hit the nylon floor with his hand stiffly aloft. Needle

in the crooks of his fingers. The fly did a circle around the inside of the tent and landed on his mouth again.

She sat, eyes searching. Her hair was high and matted. She reached under the fallen lawn chair and found a beige sunglass case and opened it. Three needles and a bag of junk inside.

She patted the sides of her legs and felt her phone in her right front pocket. There was one missed call from out of state. She put the phone and the case in a straw handbag and set it on her lap.

She wanted to cry but no tears would come.

"Harv," she said once more. Her voice was sad and quiet. She barely looked at him. "I'm sorry baby but I gotta go."

The campfire was cold. A powdery ash drifted out of the pit and across the campsite. There was a bald man she knew only by nickname slouched against the base of a young redwood tree. Dead eyes staring at the dirt. In the window of another tent she saw a woman with abscesses on her mouth and yellow curds of vomit pasted to her shoulder.

All was still and silent.

Jeanie went to the bald corpse and stood over him. An orange and blue hypodermic needle poked out of the leaflitter like some prize he had found. She went through his pockets and found his wallet and phone. There were three twenties in the billfold. She put the cash in her bag and flipped the phone open with her thumb. Two bars, twenty percent charged.

Jeanie dialed 911. She waited until the dispatcher spoke, then she dropped the open phone in the dead

man's lap. She turned and stepped through the blackberry brambles and poison oak to where a trail formed in the forest silt.

One last glance over her shoulder.

There was a heavy mist in the air. Almost rain. Jeanie stepped from the trail into the county park like some college kid who had lost her frisbee in the brush. There was an empty bench along the path and she sat there, watching the road. She scrolled through her missed calls. Minnesota. Long Beach. She thought there was a siren coming down the road but it was only a car alarm.

The phone rang in her hands. Minnesota again.

She flipped the phone open.

"Baby that you," she said. Her voice was saccharine.

"Mommy?" The girl was loud and happy. "Mommy I've been trying to call you for like three days."

"I just saw your calls baby. I've been out of range. In the forest, you know. Camping."

"You still in California, Mommy?"

The car alarm had stopped but now there was a Sheriff's cruiser pulling into the parking lot.

"Yeah baby. I'm in Boulder Creek now. The trees are real big. Biggest I've ever seen."

"How big?" The girl's voice was crackling with excitement.

"So big. I even camped inside one of them with room to stand up and everything."

The deputy was just sitting in the car with his head tilted to the radio on his shoulder.

"Mommy?"

"Yeah baby?"

There was a long pause and someone else's voice muttered in the background.

"I was wondering if it was okay to call grandma mommy too. You know, just while you're gone?"

Jeanie squeezed her eyes shut and pressed the phone to her chest. She could hear the girl calling for her through the tiny speaker. There were tears now in the corners of her eyes.

"Baby you can call grandma whatever you want."

"But you're still my number one mommy okay?"

"I know baby. I know." Jeanie pressed the phone to her chest again and the tears coursed over her gaunt cheekbones. "I'm you're number one mommy."

The girl said goodbye. There was the sound of the phone being passed around.

"Goodbye Jeanie." It was her mother. Her voice was cold and professional. She hung up before Jeanie could respond.

Jeanie shut the phone and wiped her eyes with the cuffs of her sleeve. The deputy was standing in a patch of crabgrass looking at his phone. The speaker on his shoulder was clicking out information. He saw Jeanie on the bench and walked to her. He was bald and his eyes were dark and serious.

"Did you call 911, ma'am?" said the deputy.

Jeanie shook her head.

"Show me your phone. The call history."

Jeanie lifted her phone in the air. The deputy eyed it and muttered into his shoulder and walked on.

#

"He's gonna kill you, Jeanie." Tina was spreading her third packet of strawberry jam over a piece of

toasted white bread. She licked her fingers and took a bite. "Maybe he's gonna kill me now too."

"Aint gonna kill us," said Jeanie.

The waitress came by and held the carafe over Tina's mug with a puzzled look as if she had heard part of the conversation and was trying to make sense of it. She poured the coffee and moved along without a word.

"I don't know," said Tina. She had run out of jelly packets and was looking at the unoccupied tables for more. "I'd probably kill you if it were me."

"Keep your voice down about it."

"Just sayin you're the only one who knows he sold bad junk."

"I know that."

"They'll get him for murder. It was probably rat poison."

Jeanie narrowed her eyes and put a finger over her lips. There were customers at the counter looking over their shoulders. She stabbed a small sausage link on her plate and held it in the air at eye-level.

"Wasn't rat poison. China White, maybe. Sellin bad junk is second degree murder anyhow."

"Did you look that up on your phone? They'll see what you been lookin up."

"Don't matter. I'm leaving tonight. My little girl needs me."

"Well that solves *your* problem. What about me?"

"He doesn't know that you know."

"He's probably watching us through the window now."

"Don't be paranoid, Tina."

"How come you didn't die anyhow?"

"I had my own."

"Chemo knows by now. I can feel it. He's watching."

"I said *don't be paranoid*, Tina."

"Don't tell me what to be."

They sat without talking for a while. The waitress quit filling the coffee and brought the bill on a plastic tray with loose toothpicks and turned back again. An ambulance passed on the road with sirens on.

"We need to score before I leave," said Jeanie. She put a twenty in the tray. "Enough to get me home and then I'm done with it."

Tina was looking out the window. A gust rattled the glass and a woman in the parking lot lost her hat. It flipped and stalled in the air as if it were being passed between ghosts.

"How much you got?" Tina said.

"I got enough," said Jeanie.

"Snoopy won't sell dimers."

"I got more than that."

The waitress came to the table and tapped on the tray with the tips of her acrylic fingernails.

"You gotta pay the cashier," she said.

Jeanie waited in the parking lot for Tina's text.

She found a halfsmoked cigarette on a brick ledge under the diner window and flicked out the dead cherry and lit the fresh tobacco underneath. She watched the tops of the redwoods sway in the dim fog and smoked. Spattering of water on the car windows from the wet branches above. She watched her phone but her phone was dark and still.

A young couple came out of the diner holding hands. They were laughing about something that

happened inside. Jeanie asked them for money but the man said he didn't have any. Then she asked for a cigarette, but they ignored her and climbed into a Subaru and started the engine. They sat there awhile with the wipers on and then the young man got out and walked to her. He wore a hoodie and a thick brown beard.

"Have you read this?" He said. In his hands was a tiny leatherbound bible.

Jeanie took it and thumbed the pages.

"Yeah I read it," she said.

"What did you think?"

"The ending was a little strange to tell the truth," she said.

He chuckled politely, as if he didn't get the joke.

"Would you read it again if I gave it to you?"

"I'd read it again for twenty bucks."

He opened his wallet and handed her the money. Jeanie took the money and licked her thumb and flipped to the first page.

"Darkness was over the surface of the deep," she said.

"That's not how it starts," said the young man.

Jeanie squinted at the page.

"Damn near how it starts," she said.

"What about 'Let there be light?'"

"That's next."

"That's not how I remember it," said the young man. His girlfriend was taking pictures of them with her phone.

"Guess we had our first argument," Jeanie said. "My father always told me religion was the root of all conflict."

"Do you believe him?" said the young man.

"Well, he was a preacher after all."

By the time Tina's text came Jeanie had begun to sweat. She was sheltered under the eve of a toolshed in the Felton Cemetery. Steady, windless rain. Her phone was charging from an electrical socket on the outside of the shed. The jack was frayed and she had to press the wire with her thumb to maintain the charge.

The text scrolled by: *Grease pit at 5:00*

Jeanie thumbed a response: *Why not now?*

No reply.

Rainwater spattered from the roof of the shed. Jeanie's stomach churned and the hair on her temples was dark with sweat.

A man appeared suddenly from around the corner. He wore a white slicker and green rainboots. In his hands was a flathead shovel.

"You can't be here," said the man. There was fear in his voice as if he had been taken by surprise.

"Can't I just charge my phone?"

"The cemetery's closed."

The man leaned on the shovel and watched her. Strange blue eyes.

Jeanie unplugged the charger and put in her pocket.

"My grandmother is buried here," she said.

"Your grandmother is buried where?"

"Over there by the tree." Jeanie pointed to a small headstone by an oak tree. Bright sourgrass in the nook of the stone.

"What was her name?"

"It's right there. You can read it yourself."

The man looked her up and down. "You look sick."

"I'm okay."

He looked at the headstone and back at Jeanie. The sound of rain was all around them like static.

"If you tell me her name you can stay in the shed."

Jeanie wiped the sweat from her forehead. "Her name was Margaret Cullen."

The man went to the plot and squatted before it. He brushed the letters with the tips of his fingers then he looked back at Jeanie and nodded. He walked to her and unlocked the tool shed with a heavy ring of keys.

Jeanie looked inside. The walls were lined with greasy shelves and there was a lawnmower and cans of gasoline inside. Rat turds in the doorjamb. She looked at the padlock and looked at the blue-eyed man.

"I'll just leave if it's all the same."

The sky was now dismal and stonecolored. Curtains of water spattering against the road as if by malice. Jeanie lifted the lid of a recycling bin that had been set out on the curb and vomited into it and then she went on. She had no shelter from the rain and stuck to the eves where they could be found. There was a laundromat at the corner of the road and she shouldered into the brick window sill under a green canopy and waited.

She looked at her phone. 4:43.

Across the road sat the auto shop. Three bays with white rolldoors. Graffiti on the pocked

cinderblock wall. One of the doors was pulled halfway open and she could see someone moving back and forth inside. She watched. There was the sound a pneumatic ratchet whining away at a stuck bolt.

At 5:03 Tina peddled by on an orange ten-speed bicycle. She wore a white kitchen trash bag with a hole cut out for her head and a pink shower cap. She leaned the bike against one of the bay doors and looked around while shielding her eyes from the rain. She saw Jeanie and waved her over.

"You look like a drowned rat," said Tina. She was shouting over the sound of the rain.

"You look like a human tampon," said Jeanie.

They went to the half-opened door and knocked. There was campesino music playing on a car stereo. The door rolled upward and flattened over the shop ceiling and a man with a polyester jumpsuit stood with an unlit cigarette in one hand and a propane torch in the other.

"Hola chicas," said the man. He dabbed the cigarette in the spear of the torchflame and put it in his mouth. "Pasale."

"Hey Snoopy," said Tina.

Snoopy nodded with the cigarette in the center of his lips and began working the torch underneath the front end of a sixty-eight Camaro. Cascades of red and orange sparks. The Camaro was raised high on a lift jack and there was an oil stand underneath mottled with grease.

"Jeanie's got the money," said Tina.

"Magnifico," said Snoopy. He talked fast and darted out from under the car. "Si tienen la plata, tengo las drogas."

Tina looked at Jeanie.

Jeanie pushed a waterlogged twenty at Snoopy.

Snoopy smiled and began to dance to the crescendo of a song that had come on. Loud horn interlude. He spun with the torch still casting freckles of light and grabbed the money from Jeanie's hand. He stuffed the money in his pocket and held up a finger and went to his tool box.

"It ain't bad junk?" Asked Jeanie.

Tina gave her a look.

"Bad yunk?" Snoopy said. He stood there, looking over his shoulder.

"I heard it's going around." Jeanie felt like she was going to vomit again. The shop smelled of hot steel and propane.

"Quien murió?"

"Be quiet about it Jeanie," Tina hissed.

A loud car was idling just outside. It sounded like a big block with a modified exhaust.

Everyone looked at each other.

The car kept idling. Sputtering.

Tina backed away from the door. "Oh God it's Chemo," she said. "Did you rat us out, Snoopy?"

Snoopy raised his hands in the air. "No rats," he said.

"Snoopy hates Chemo," said Jeanie. "He must have followed us."

"I told you he was watching us," Tina said. She was backed against the wall now, covering her eyes with her fingertips. "*Oh God Jeanie I told you so.*"

A pair of gloved hands appeared under the edge of the rollup and the door slid upward in the tracks. Standing in the opening was a tall man with long black hair and a black beard. He wore large sunglasses

like an actress from the 1950s. He rolled the door down behind him and stomped his boot on the floor and roared at Tina.

Tina started to cry.

"I love it," he said with a small chuckle. "I absolutely *love* it. I appear and everyone cries."

"I aint cryin," said Jeanie.

"Not yet." He yawned and smacked his lips as if he had just awoken from a nap, then pulled a phone from his pocket and thumbed at the screen. "They're looking for you, Jeanie."

Jeanie didn't respond. She was watching Snoopy slip his hand into the tool box. The bay doors brightened a little and thunder rumbled overhead.

Chemo held the phone out. There was a mugshot of Jeanie on the screen.

"It's an APB flyer," he said. "B.O.L. *Be on the lookout*. You fled a crime scene this morning. Doesn't sound like something you'd do, Jeanie. But I'd hate for them to start interviewing witnesses. You know, start following the leads. Next thing you know you're pointing the finger at your pal Chemo."

"Fuck you, Chemo." Jeanie said. "We aint friends."

Chemo laughed. "I wouldn't fuck you with Snoopy's dick."

"Puta madre," said Snoopy. He spun around with a silver revolver in his hand and squeezed the trigger. The hammer landed on empty chambers. Just a small and impotent click.

Chemo shook his head slowly.

"Bullets are cheap, Snoop. That a .38?" He pulled a similar revolver from his jacket and spun the cylinder in his hand. He tipped out a round in his

palm and held it between his fingers. "Here, have one of mine." He tossed the round to Snoopy.

Snoopy caught the round and began to slowly load the cylinder. His eyes were wild looking.

"Now I feel better about it," said Chemo. He raised the revolver and shot Snoopy three times in the chest. Snoopy tumbled to the ground and his silver .38 skidded across the shop. One of the rounds hit the air compressor behind Snoopy and a cold white mist filled the room.

Tina had found a two-foot pry bar and was running at Chemo with the thing over her head. With her trash bag and shower cap she looked like some kind of conserved lunatic set free by clerical error. The bar struck Chemo in the jaw and he stumbled backwards and fired another two rounds. They struggled in the vapors. If either was succeeding over the other Jeanie could not make it out. They screamed and cussed.

Another gunshot.

All was still but the white and billowing air.

Jeanie's heel grazed the hose of the unlit propane torch and she felt around the floor for it. The only sound was the escaping compressor air, like the sound of pouring sand. Even the music had stopped.

Chemo's face appeared in the haze. He was grinning. A bite wound bleeding from his cheek.

"Just me and you baby," he said.

Jeanie couldn't back up anymore.

"Doesn't have to be this way," she said.

"What way?" He held up his hands. No gun could be seen.

The pressure in the pneumatic lines was dropping and the Camaro sank slow and silent in the air.

"You aint letting me out of here and we both know it."

Chemo laughed. "You should be happy. You get to see all your dead junky friends again."

Jeanie lit the torch with her cigarette lighter.

Chemo stopped. He took a step back.

She squeezed the torch handle and the flame grew.

He took another step back.

The Camaro's chassis was caught high centered on the oil stand. It began to tilt as it sank in the air. Chemo was glancing around him, looking for the gun that Tina must have batted away in the scuffle.

"I'll shoot you if I have to," he said.

"With what? You got another peashooter in your boot?"

The Camaro was now dangling at a forty-five degree angle and Chemo was standing nearly underneath it. The car made a screech and began to slide from the sinking lift.

Chemo turned.

Before he could register what was happening, the car toppled sideways off the lift and fell directly on top of him.

Jeanie jumped back. The sound was tremendous. Glass fragments tumbled onto the shop floor and glimmered in the torchlight. She felt the impact in the pit of her stomach. A mildewed patch of ceiling fell onto the wreck and broke apart.

Chemo groaned.

The air was clearing and Jeanie could see he had become wedged inside the Camaro through the open driver window. The car was on its side and he was crammed upright with his head against the car stereo.

The campesino music started up again.

Jeanie spotted Snoopy's half-smoked cigarette lying on the ground and lit it.

Chemo groaned again.

She watched him and smoked. The compressor had completely emptied and now she saw Tina dead on the ground with a bullet wound in her neck.

"Help me," said Chemo. He was eyeballing her with a face full of blood. You could only see the whites of his eyes through the shattered windshield.

"Aint gonna help you, Chemo."

"Help me," he said again. His voice was just a wet babble.

"Why? So you can kill me? You're a damn dirty snake is what you are."

"I'll help you."

"Help me what? You gonna be my lawyer when the cops come?"

She was now looking through Snoopy's tool box. It only took her a few seconds to find the bindles of heroin. Her hands were shaking. She set out a spoon that was bent back against the handle so it stood up like a candle holder. She cooked the dope in the cup of the spoon with a tea candle and water from the shop sink.

"Oh my god *it hurts*," said Chemo. There was blood now dripping from the heel of his boot. He moaned like some midnight accident victim waiting to be discovered. "*Oh god oh god.*"

Jeanie took a hit in the crook of her elbow. She was quiet for a moment. Eyes searching the rotten ceiling.

She took a deep breath.

"I'm gonna take your boot off," Jeanie said.

Chemo was breathing heavy. "Okay."

She worked off his boot and slid his sock over his heel. She took the packet of bad junk from her sunglass case and cooked it.

"I don't want it," said Chemo.

Jeanie found a vein in his ankle and gave him a full load of the bad junk. She rolled his sock back over the ball of his foot and worked his boot back on. There was blood on the palms of her hands.

"You can say hi to my junky friends yourself," she said.

Jeanie went to Tina's body and kneeled over her. She kissed her fingers and ran them down her cheek.

Chemo mumbled something, but she could not make it out. He tilted his head and the volume on the radio spiked.

Trumpets blaring.

Outside was a black Plymouth Barracuda with silver racing stripes down the hood. It was still idling with the door cracked open. Jeanie sat in the driver seat and put it in gear. AM sports on the radio. She thumbed the dial and stopped at Billie Holiday singing "Don't Explain" and steered the Barracuda onto the leafcovered road.

When she got to the highway there were police cruisers heading the other direction with lights and sirens. She took the wheel with one hand and wedged

a picture of a young girl with pigtails and coke bottle glasses into the groove of the rearview.

"I'm coming baby," she said to the photograph.

A fly rattled against the windshield and she cranked the window to let it out. It circled the cab once and vanished into the rainswept darkness.

Copyright © 2019 C.W. Blackwell

# IN THE BLOOD

## Robert Petyo

At eleven o'clock, Gary finished his third, or maybe his fourth, bottle of beer and saw the name Frederick Adano in the report from YourRoots.com. Throwing the page down on the coffee table, he knocked over his bottle. He watched the amber liquid seeping across the table to the carpet, staining some of the fifty pages that were scattered on the table and the floor.

When he had first printed the report, he was stunned at its size. After scanning through the first few pages that looked like legal mumbo jumbo, he found a pie chart on page six that confirmed what he already knew. He was Irish and Italian, though his father would be disappointed to see that he was only 35% Italian. Apparently, the missing 15% of his father was squeezed into about thirty other

nationalities that also had slivers on the pie chart. His father wasn't the pure Italian he always bragged that he was.

Gary stopped for a long swig of beer. This was more interesting than he had expected it to be.

Diane would be mocking him if she were with him right then. "All that DNA stuff is a crock," she said. "Who cares about your ancestry? Who cares if you're one percent Lithuanian or if you're a distant relative of Queen Elizabeth? That doesn't shape who you are. We're Americans. That's all that matters. And we like to party," she added with a giggle.

Sometimes, he felt like smacking her a few times to get her to take life more seriously. Once, he even fantasized about tying her up and using a knife to scare some sense into her.

Of course, he could never harm her. Despite their occasional clashes, both business and personal, he loved her and depended on her.

His mother was the one who first directed him to the DNA website. "Learn about where you come from, Gary. It will help you. It's very important to know who we really are, and why you do what you do."

At first, he ignored her. It wasn't that important, he thought, leaning toward Diane's take. We are who we are. But as his mother began to deteriorate, Gary understood that she might be right. After she was gone, he'd be alone. Since Diane still eluded him, he had no family of his own. He was curious about his ancestry.

The next page of the report had a list of his immediate family members. Mother, father and his sister, Rose. She had been killed by a drunk driver

when she was sixteen. Gary took a deep breath when he looked at her name next to a silhouette of a woman's face. He and his sister had never been close. The six-year age difference kept them apart when they were growing, and Gary always resented how his parents seemed to dote on the younger girl. After the tragedy, they seemed broken, withdrawing even farther from him to the point of shunning him. But now, ten years later, he missed what could have been.

Subsequent pages started listing cousins, all familiar to him in name only. Each had a silhouette and a listing of ages, birth date and location. Eventually the pamphlet listed some names he didn't recognize who must be very distant relatives, though some had question marks beside their silhouettes. Apparently, YourRoots.com was unsure of the connection. Pages and pages. Could they all be related? Or were the DNA experts just throwing out names to make a buck?

For a moment he thought Diane might be right. It was all a crock. Of course, he would never admit it to her.

He glanced at the clock as he sipped more beer. Eight o'clock. Something told him he was going to be at this all night.

About halfway through the pamphlet the names shifted to earlier ancestors. His father's parents. His mother's parents. Their siblings. Then, his grandmother and grandfather. Their relatives. All strangers to him.

He scattered the report on the table before taking another sip of beer. He finished the bottle and went for another. Before he got back to the report there was a knock at the door. He opened it and let Diane

in. She hugged a handful of papers that poked out like flower petals. "Your opening chapter," she said.

"What did you think?"

"Good." But she didn't sound enthusiastic. "But I know you can do better, big guy."

"Maybe." He pointed back toward the coffee table in front of the sofa. "Right now I'm working on my DNA report."

"DNA? Oh, that thing. Goody for you." She shoved the papers at him and approached the table.

He hurried into his tiny office and stacked the chapter neatly next to his computer. He liked giving Diane hard copies rather than emailing her the chapters. It made him feel like he had accomplished something. "You want a drink?" he asked, as he returned to the living room. "We can go over this report."

"What? Play with a bunch of mumbo jumbo and hocus pocus?" She waved some pages from the report in the air. "No thanks. I told you. You're wasting your time with this."

He stepped toward her, and for just a moment, he felt the urge to crack her on the side of the head, knocking that smirk into the sky. Instead, he stiffened, reminding himself that Diane, who was adopted from Russia as an infant, was super sensitive about her family history. "Fine. Get out of here, then. Leave me alone."

"Yeah. Of course." She dropped the pages on the coffee table. "But think about your book. It's more important than whose DNA you got."

He gave her a backhanded wave, as she left, and he sipped his beer and took a few breaths to rekindle his enthusiasm. There were so many names. The

ancestry listing went back almost two hundred years to before his great grandparents emigrated to the United States, but he wasn't as interested in his European roots. He wanted to learn about the connections he had in this country. He was interested in the late nineteenth century, when his great great grandparents met in the United States. He heard stories that they met on the ship while coming over, but he believed that was a romantic family myth, meant to soften the sad news that she had died in childbirth.

The pages were scattered over the table now and he tried to put them in some kind of order.

At eleven o'clock he saw it.

Ferdinand Adano. Definitely an ancestor. No question mark next to his silhouette. "Born 1871. Died 1905. Arrested for the murders of eight people, including his four children."

He was familiar with the Adano case. He had done a paper on him for his Criminal Psychology class. The mind of mass murderers had always fascinated him and was what drove him to researching and writing crime books. He referenced Adano in the first book he published on serial killers.

After a second book, he was now working on a third, the one Diane seemed unexcited about. It was about Adano.

Ferdinand Adano, a dockworker, went on a 2-day rampage with a butcher's knife, murdering his four children and their three mothers along with a witness to the crimes before a patrolman stumbled upon him attacking his potential ninth victim. Adano was thrown into prison. The newspapers compared him to Jack the Ripper who had terrorized London a

decade before. They wanted to know who he was. They wanted to know what drove him to massacre his extended family. They wanted to know what kind of unmarried man fathered children with three different women. But these questions were never answered. Adano said little, and before the trial began, he committed suicide, slitting his wrists and neck and bleeding out before his jailers found him.

Gary watched the liquid drying on his carpet and shuddered. There were so many unanswered questions about Adano's life. It was why he was struggling with the book.

He didn't know how long he sat at the table, and he didn't check the time before grabbing his phone and calling Diane, but when he heard her muffled, confused response, he realized that it was past midnight.

"Sorry," he said. "I didn't realize the time."

"What's wrong?"

"Are you home?"

"Of course, I'm home. I'm in bed sleeping like every other normal person."

"Can I come over?"

"Why? What's going on?"

"YourRoots.com."

"Oh."

"I want to talk to you about it."

"Why? Did you find out you were adopted or something?" When he didn't respond, her voice deepened and grew more serious. "Come on. Lighten up. I told you that stuff was a waste of time. You know my feelings on that crap."

"I can be there in fifteen minutes." He gathered up the sheets and gouged his thumb as he clipped them together.

Diane lived in an apartment building just five blocks from Gary's home. They first met in the apartment lobby when Gary was considering renting a place for his mother who could no longer live in their family home. Gary didn't really have the time or the resources to care for her. A nice apartment complex filled with retirees who helped each other out might be the perfect transitional home for her, though eventually, he knew, she would finish life in a nursing home.

Diane, who lived in the building because she appreciated the low rents and because it was close to the train station, convinced him to set up his mother there. It was later that he learned she worked for a publisher.

She got his first manuscript published and they started working together, and almost immediately started dating. Quickly serious, but once it became clear to Diane that he had no interest in having children, marriage was off the table and their relationship cooled. But business kept them close.

And he still hoped she might change her attitude and allow a no strings romance.

Her apartment was on the first floor and she met him at the door after buzzing him into the lobby. She looked refreshed like she had gotten out of bed and taken a quick shower to prepare for his arrival. Sparkling eyes and a smiling face. She pulled him into the room and quickly darkened as she studied his

appearance. "You look terrible," she said as she stepped away from the door.

"Get me a glass of water." He brushed his forehead.

"Your hand." She pointed to the blood dripping from his thumb. She got him a tissue and a bandage, then a glass of water. "What happened?"

"I don't know." He pressed his bandaged thumb against the glass. "Must have banged it somewhere."

"You should be home resting, Gary. I told you. You have a lot of work to do. Your opening chapter needs work, and we're on a tight deadline."

"I don't care about books right now." He threw the report from YourRoots.com on the rickety coffee table in front of her sofa. "I'm related to Ferdinand Adano."

Confused, she stared at the papers for a moment. "You mean the murderer?"

He nodded.

"The one you're writing about? The one who killed his kids?"

He nodded more vigorously this time, spilling some of the water from the glass he held.

"Well, isn't that a kick in the pants?" she said with a smile as she moved toward the sofa.

"This is no joke."

She sat. "Oh, come on, Gary. What are you thinking? That you're going to become a serial killer all of a sudden?" She waved her hands in the air.

He didn't respond as he looked down at the glass of water. That was exactly what he thought. He often fantasized about killing people. When someone angered him by doing something stupid, he stifled his rage by imagining taking a knife to the idiot. He

thought about ways to plan the perfect murder. It was always just harmless venting, part of what drove his fascination with the minds of killers. That fascination had led to a budding career.

A harmless obsession.

But now he wasn't so sure.

She paged through the pamphlet. "You got these pages all mixed up. Eeeew. Some of these pages are wet. What is that? Beer?" When he didn't say anything, she kept flipping pages. "Here it is," she finally said as she held it in front of her. "Did you check all the people around him?"

"No."

She scanned the pages.

"You don't have to check," he said. "He murdered his family." Gary had researched Adano's life for his book, but a lot of his life was unaccounted for. He had never seen any connection to his own family.

"Then how is he related to you, smarty pants?" She tapped a page. "Here it is. He had a sister. Apparently, she was one of your great grandmothers."

"What?" He thumped down his glass and grabbed the pages from her but was too upset to scan what she had been looking at.

"Calm down," Diane said, snatching the pages back.

"I remember now that he had a sister. I remember that from my research. Frederica, I think her name was. She was devastated by the murders. Ended up in an insane asylum."

"Not before she had another child." She read from the pages she held. "Frederica Adano married George Rizotto and had two children."

"Rizotto," he repeated. George Rizotto. His great great grandfather. But his wife had died giving birth to a son. At least, that was the story the family passed down. Did she really die in an insane asylum after her brother murdered his family?

Gary was related to Ferdinand Adano, mass murderer who had destroyed his family.

Trembling, he looked at Diane.

She threw the pages on the coffee table. "Just sit down and relax, Gary. This doesn't mean anything."

He staggered toward a wide backed armchair, but he didn't sit. "Have you ever wondered why I'm so obsessed with murderers? It's all I ever write about."

"No," she said. "I never wondered. All I cared about was that the books sold and we made some money."

"Well, I wondered about it. Sometimes I would be analyzing myself, trying to understand the obsession." He turned again.

"No, wait. Snap out of it. Are you going to write a children's book now all of a sudden?" She pointed to the coffee table. "I told you that's all a crock. All it shows is that a hundred years ago you had some crazy relatives. It doesn't mean shit to your life. Face it, we all have crazy relatives. It's got nothing to do with who we are. We control our own destiny, Always."

Gary stared at the pamphlet but made no move to retrieve it. "Well, how about this? Have you ever wondered why I didn't want any kids?"

She froze for a moment. "I think about it all the time. It's because you think you'd be a lousy father. I've been trying and trying to make you see reason."

He kept shaking his head at her.

"Wait," she said. "Are you now going to say it's because of a killer's DNA?"

"A man who killed his kids." He moved around the chair and stepped toward the door.

"Wait." She leapt forward, her arms extended. "You've got to forget all this crap and get back to work. I didn't want to tell you this, but we're under more pressure than you think."

He gave her a questioning look, even though he didn't really care.

"Frye wants to cancel your book."

He shrugged.

She stepped forward and jabbed a finger at him. "Don't shrug it off. He wants to cancel the crime line, and your books are going to be the first to go."

"Who cares? I can always go to another publisher." When her eyes flared and her cheeks flushed, he realized she didn't really care about him. Just his books.

"You're not going to another publisher." She took another step forward. "We're going to work together and change Frye's mind."

"Is that all you care about, bitch?"

"What?"

He stepped toward her, his curled hands coming up. "Somebody should teach you a lesson." He grabbed her before she could bolt away and before he knew it his hands were around her neck, cutting off any screams. She gagged, and when her eyes started to bulge he abruptly shoved her onto the sofa, where she bounced on the cushions and slid to the floor, staring up at him.

What was he doing? He turned and left the apartment.

He didn't remember how he got home. He didn't remember driving. He didn't remember entering his house. He didn't remember getting to his bedroom. He only remembered the dream that woke him.

He sat in the front seat of the car next to his sister Rose. He leaned against her, nudging her toward the door. He was furious, shouting at her. He snaked his fingers around her neck and choked off her screams. Then the windshield exploded as the car jolted to a stop.

And he woke up, his tee shirt saturated with sweat, the sheet twisted in a ball at the foot of his bed.

"Mom, I have to talk to you."

The woman seated in the wheelchair gaped with vacant grey blue eyes. Sparse white hair sprouted like weeds from her reddish skull.

"It's me. Gary."

"That's nice," she said in a sing song voice.

"Your son. I'm your son."

Her face contorted slightly as she looked around the small room.

Gary sighed. He had asked the caregiver to allow them some privacy. But his mother was always sharper when the caregiver, someone she was familiar with, was present. "I want to talk to you about your daughter."

"My what?"

"Your daughter Rose." He handed her the picture he had removed from his wallet. It showed him at a wedding, seated next to Rose.

Her eyes lightened as she looked at the picture. "She's pretty."

"She was your daughter."

"My daughter?" She said it with a questioning lilt as she held the picture out toward him.

He waited, watching her face.

"Rose," she finally said.

"That's right." He took the picture.

"Who's that man with her?"

Sighing, he slipped the picture into his shirt pocket. "I know this isn't easy for you, but do you remember when she died?"

"She died?"

"Yes," he said. "Long ago."

"She died." She said it with a firm voice, tainted with anger, not sadness. "An accident."

"Yes. That's right." He could finally see lucidity flooding her face. She had her good days and her bad days.

"A drunk. He killed her." The rage in her voice startled him. Her eyes were suddenly clear as she stared at him.

"I'm sorry for bringing this up." He kept his voice soft and level. "But it hurt me, too. She was my sister."

"Your sister." She said it with a firm nod. And suddenly she straightened in the chair, stabbing him with a stern look. "Gary," she said. "Why are you here?"

"I want to know exactly what happened that night. Do you remember?"

"Of course." She paused, looking away for a moment. "You killed her."

"No. A drunk driver crashed into us."

"You were thrown free. You were lucky you survived." Her eyes hardened as she stared at him. "My Rose died."

"You said I killed her?"

She nodded weakly.

"How? Did I say anything to you that night?"

She didn't respond, and he saw her eyes suddenly glisten with tears. Her lips trembled and her hands balled into fists, but she didn't make a sound.

"Did I tell you what happened?" He stood. "Were Rose and I arguing?"

Her eyes were a wall of water now, water that was dammed up, unable to drip down her cheeks. "We never spoke of it after that night." Her words bubbled like simmering soup. "Your father made me promise never to mention it again."

"What happened? What did I tell you that night?"

Her face went blank again, her mouth agape, as she looked away.

"Mom?"

"Thank you for visiting." Her voice quivered.

"I love you, Mom."

She didn't respond.

There was no way to know exactly what happened in that car. Gary didn't remember that night. The crash and the aftermath were blocked from his memory. But the nightmares were becoming more frequent. Some of the details changed, but in each dream, he caused the accident. He was arguing with Rose, distracting her.

And the look on his mother's face when he spoke to her earlier told him what he feared.

He had killed his sister. He knew it then and had confessed to his mother. It was part of why she and his father shunned him. But gradually, he blocked it from his memory, focusing on the minds of other killers.

He had never read accounts of the accident, and now he knew why. He was afraid of learning the truth.

On line, he researched the contemporary news accounts. The driver of the other car had also been killed. A post mortem indicated he had been drunk. A similar test of Rose had come up negative. But there was no mention of his being tested. He had been found unconscious thirty feet from the vehicle. The passenger's door had been flung open. Since he was a passenger, and they didn't test him.

He was drunk. At that point in his life he was always drunk. He had been arguing with Rose. Distracting her. Grabbing her so that she couldn't avoid the oncoming car.

He was a murderer. Just like Frederick Adano.

It was his destiny.

What could he do? How could he live with that?

The ringing phone grabbed him and he stared at it for several seconds before finally picking it up. He said nothing.

"I'll be there in five minutes." It was Diane.

Still he said nothing as he listened to the dial tone after she hung up.

He had no idea what she wanted, but he knew what he had to do. After bringing a wooden stiff backed chair out of his bedroom, he went to the tiny

kitchen and checked the block of wood near the microwave on the tile counter. Several black handles stuck out of the chocolate brown wood. He selected a wide butcher's knife, carefully pulling it out and turning it slightly to let the fluorescent kitchen light glint off the blade like flashes of lightning.

He returned to the sofa and sat staring at the report from YourRoots.com., clipped together by an oversized clip that shone in the light.

He concentrated on slow even breathing as he waited.

When Diane came in without knocking, he looked up but said nothing.

"I got a text from Frye," she said. She looked worn out, her eyelids wrinkled and brown, the skin on her bare arms trembling. He couldn't believe he had ever found her attractive. "He's made a final decision. Your book is dead."

He gave a disinterested wave of his free hand as he struggled to his feet. He kept his hand with the knife pressed against the back of his thigh.

"But I'm not finished yet," she continued. "I think we have one last card to play. This DNA thing."

He stood rigid, waiting for her to say more.

"We play up your DNA connection to Adano. We use it as a selling point. You're writing about an ancestor. That's a slam dunk. There's no way Frye can say no to that. And I'll go over his head if I have to."

"That might work," he conceded.

"Of course, it'll work." Desperation rattled in her voice.

"But I don't think I could write it." He moved toward her, angling so that the knife stayed out of her view. "I'm finished."

"What the heck does that mean?"

He took another step.

"You're giving up your career? You're not going to write the Adano book? Because of a stupid DNA test?"

"I'm a murderer. I killed my sister." He was right beside her now, so close he could smell her sweaty anger.

"What are you talking about?"

He pressed against her and grabbed a hunk of hair in his left hand, yanking her head back until she was bent over his knee. He brought the blade up and held in front of her face. Her face went rigid and pale. "What—" was all she could mumble as she struggled to keep from falling.

"You wanted that Adano connection from the start, didn't you?" He sidled over to a chair, shuffling her in front of him, keeping the threatening blade in front of her face. "You figured it was a way to save your career." He shoved her into the wooden chair and quickly yanked her hands back behind it.

"Gary. What are you doing? Please."

There were two sets of handcuffs attached to the wooden rod across the base of the chair. He locked each on one of her wrists and raised up behind her, throwing one arm around her chest, pinning her to the chair. He kept the blade in front of her face, ensuring she wouldn't struggle "You made it up. You brought the page with the Adano connection over that night. You slipped it into the report."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You're so quick to use the connection to sell the book. Aren't you?"

"Well, yes." She tried to crane back to see him, but his forearm tightened, pressing her into the chair. "I want the book to be a success. For both of us."

"So, you played with my mind. You planted those pages."

"That's crazy. I didn't do that."

He swung around the chair, leaning over her, pressing his knee into her lap, keeping the knife pointed at her throat. "You were desperate to save your career," he shouted. "You wanted my book. But you didn't give a shit about me."

"None of it means anything, Gary," she pleaded. "Let me go. You're not Adano." Her eyes bulged. "DNA or no DNA. You're not a killer."

He put the tip of the knife against her neck and watched her eyes almost pop out of their sockets. "I killed my sister." He said it softly, almost a whisper.

The tears were dripping across her cheeks. She kept still, her eyes stretching toward the blade as if looking for a speck of blood.

This was his fantasy come to life, he thought.

A killer's DNA.

He straightened and leapt back, twisting his wrist and driving the blade up into his gut until it was buried to the hilt.

Diane screamed.

He jabbed upward as hard as he could.

Copyright © 2019 Robert Petyo

# STONE OF SOULS

## J.S. Rogers

The air in the Duke of Daverford's dungeon smelled of mold. The stone walls glimmered with moisture leeched in from the surrounding earth, and some pale creeping fungus grew bulbous in one corner. The ceiling hung low. Grime covered everything, save the gate; that gleamed, free of rust and carefully cared for. A torch out in the hall provided the only light in the room.

Harik waited, chained to the floor by thick shackles at his wrists; their bolts sank deep into the stone foundation of the castle. He sat with his legs crossed on the floor, and cold seeped up into his flesh. The slow slide of blood down the side of his scalp, courtesy of an absent blow by one of the guards after they were sure he'd been restrained securely, itched terribly as he waited. It wouldn't be much longer until he escaped and moved into the

castle proper to finish his contract. The thought of the gold bounty on the Duke's head kept him warm.

In the castle above, a door creaked open, allowing in a draft of air that stirred the torch's flames wildly. That would be Harik's inside man—girl, really—come to release him from the dungeon, as expected. Harik smiled. His cheeks had a tendency towards dimpling and his mouth turned smiles into grins, undercutting a degree of the intimidation provided by his sharp canines. A storm of angry curses echoed down the stairs, made by multiple voices and full of anger. Harik's smile faded.

Three guards—definitely not Harik's co-conspirator, a shy kitchen maid with a swollen belly and no love to be lost for the Duke—eventually marched down the stairs, dragging a fourth figure between them. The new prisoner made most of the noise. She snarled and swore as the guards unlocked the gate, tossed her in, kicked her back when she tried to charge out, closed the gate again, and marched back up the stairs after a few parting jeers. She threw her shoulder against the gate as the door above shut, before spinning away and stalking around the cramped perimeter of the cell.

The woman moved with purpose, ignoring the shackles holding her wrists at the small of her back. She stood at an average height for a human woman, an oddity, because her hair was the color of smelted copper, a brilliant hue only seen on the dwarves, whose hair grew in the colors of the metals they mined. She could have been an unusually tall dwarf, except that her disarrayed hair revealed ears with a distinctly elfish shape, tapered at both ends and delicate. She wore nondescript leathers, worn from

travel, and moved like she wanted to stab someone in the face. Eventually, she came to a stop in front of the gate, panting.

"Are you finished?" Harik asked. His kitchen maid should have arrived.

The woman glanced over her shoulder at him and snapped, "No." Most people, when faced with large half-orcs in small places, exhibited some degree of terror. Charming smile aside, Harik stood closer to seven-foot-tall than six and possessed plenty of both hard-earned muscle and suitably intimidating scars. She showed no sign of caring.

"There's no way out," Harik told her. "Not from the inside."

"There's always a way out," she replied. "Now, please be quiet so I can find it. Don't you know what the Duke does to his prisoners?"

"Well, I know why he needs such a small dungeon for such a large territory."

She snorted and kicked each bar on the gate.

"What's your name?" Harik asked.

She sighed and cast him a sharp look. "I said—"

"Look, relax. You can't get out and that's alright. I'll be out of here soon and you're welcome to take your leave with me. So you might as well tell me your name and how you came to enjoy the Duke's hospitality."

She stared at him for a moment. "I'm Riette. And there was a… misunderstanding." She narrowed her eyes. "How are you getting out?"

"I make friends easily," Harik said. "Here, I made friends with one of the kitchen maids."

Riette stopped kicking the gate. "Which maid?" Harik arched an eyebrow and said nothing in reply,

not about to give up the girl. "Not the one who looked fit to burst, I hope?"

Harik tensed. "Why?"

"Oh," Riette said, breezily. "I heard she'd reached her time." Her expression darkened. "The Duke was *greatly* excited about it."

Harik swore beneath his breath. The girl *had* looked ready to deliver her child at any moment. Even if she survived the delivery, she'd arrive too late to help him. He pulled at the chains holding his wrists to the floor, grunting with effort. He eyed Riette, straining upward with his shoulders. "Are you going to help?"

Riette sighed. "I suppose."

In the end, Riette used her teeth to pull a thin needle from the shoulder seam of her shirt, and they performed a complicated series of passes back and forth that eventually got the needle into her fingers. Then she knelt in front of Harik, glared at the locks around his wrists, and huffed before turning around. Harik watched in fascination as she picked the locks with her back turned and her pink tongue caught in the corner of her mouth. The locks opened with a satisfying click and Harik caught the chains before they clattered against the stone. Riette vibrated with impatience as Harik took the needle and set to work on her shackles.

"So," he asked, frowning at the tiny lock, "what brought you to Daverford?"

"You first."

Harik pulled her wrists into a better position to work. He'd hardly kept his intentions a secret. It wasn't his way. "I'm here to kill the Duke."

"Oh. Well." Riette looked over her shoulder with no evidence of surprise on her features. Plenty of others had tried to accomplish the same task, over the years. "I'm here to steal the Stone of Souls." Harik nodded. The Duke wore the Stone at all times and it was highly valued. The smallfolk claimed it gave him abilities—strength, endurance, and long life, to name a few—and that his bloody proclivities were just sacrifices to the magical talisman.

Harik believed none of the rumors. Most of the so-called magical objects he'd encountered were useless trinkets. He planned to take the stone anyway, as magical talismans, regardless of their actual abilities, commanded wonderful prices from wizards. Anyone with a spark of magic drooled over them and the potential that they might actually work. Harik narrowed his eyes at Riette. Everyone knew dwarfs could do no magic, but she wasn't exactly a dwarf. "Why?"

Riette shrugged. "Because a wizard asked me to with a bag of gold. Why are you trying to kill the Duke?"

"A widow asked me to. With a bag of gold." Riette's shackles clicked open and she stood, pulling her arms around and rubbing at her wrists.

"Give me the needle," she said, heading for the gate. Harik handed it over and leaned against the metal to watch her wrestle with the lock.

"You know," Harik said. "It seems like we're going the same way."

The lock clicked. Riette looked at Harik appraisingly and said, "It does, doesn't it?"

The Daverfords started building their castle centuries in the past and never stopped. Corridors twisted through the building, growing tighter in the older areas. Torches flickered on the walls, stirred by drafts winding through cracks in the masonry. Heavy tapestries hung over the gray stone, kept carefully dust free to display the historical achievements of the Daverfords. The markets must have run out of red thread by the time the weavers finished their work.

The only sound in the halls was the distant wailing of a newborn. "Damn," Harik hissed, adjusting his grip on the sword he'd taken from one of the guards who'd waited outside the dungeon. "Come on," he said, turning towards the wing that held the Duke's chambers.

"No," Riette said, moving down another hall, trailing her fingers along the wall. "There are guards that way."

"There are guards everywhere," Harik grumbled. "We'll just have to deal with them."

Riette ran her hand under one of the heavy tapestries and frowned. "I don't deal with guards. I go around them. Ah!" Something creaked beneath the tapestry. A cool breeze flooded into the hall below the fabric, curling around Harik's ankles. Riette drew the tapestry aside, revealing a cramped passage. "Now come this way, unless you want the Duke to know we're coming."

The passage barely admitted Harik. His shoulders scrapped against the walls if he turned the wrong way and the ceiling brushed his head with every step. Dust stirred thick beneath their feet as they walked and sometimes they stepped on things that crunched. They'd brought no light with them. Harik saw well enough in the dark to lead. Riette's small hand rested on his shoulder. "How did you know about these tunnels?" Harik asked.

"I'm a thief," Riette said, as though that explained it. "Go left where the passage splits."

They climbed spiral stairs in the dark, each step sloped by the passage of thousands of feet. Tiny glimmers of moonlight shone through hairline cracks in the mortar holding the stone together. Dark scars marred the stone, here and there. They came eventually to a wall of stone set directly across their path. A baby wailed on the other side.

"Sh," Riette murmured, squeezing by Harik in the minimal space and running her hands over the stone. Her eyes stared at nothing in the darkness. Harik saw her smile when her clever fingers slid over a curve in the stone and something in the wall clicked. The door swung in towards them, admitting a rush of warm air, the smell of a fire, and the inconsolable sound of the child's screaming. A tapestry obscured the room.

Harik touched Riette's arm and stepped around her, pushing aside the tapestry with his sword held up in an easy guard. The Duke's chambers awaited him, huge and richly furnished. Furs covered the stone floor and mounted heads of… all sorts covered the walls. A large wooden bed sat along one wall, carved with strange faces, teeth, and claws. The child lay on

the center of the mattress, swaddled and still covered with the wet mess of afterbirth. A door on the far side of the chamber led to another room. Wet sounds floated out. Harik crept across the floor. Riette followed him out of the passage, turning her attention to the giant dresser along one wall and the baubles that lay scattered across it. Jewels disappeared into her pockets in a flash. They both froze when the wet sounds ceased.

Harik put his back against the wall by the door to the second room. Riette crouched and hid on the far side of the bed. Harik flexed his fingers around the pommel of his blade, and a man—tall and fair-haired, wearing a robe of soft furs that brushed the floor—stepped from the second room. He smelled of perfumed oils. He hummed something pleasant. A necklace hung at his throat, with a large, flat stone at the center that glowed a hungry red. The Stone of Souls. The Duke. Harik prepared to skewer the man unawares, only to have the Duke lunge towards him without even looking, a knife flashing in his hand.

The Duke's blade found a seam in Harik's armor and slid in. Blood rushed hot down Harik's side and pain radiated through his gut. Harik snarled and struck the Duke a blow with enough force to break bones. The Duke didn't move, his eyes flaring angrily as he twisted the knife in Harik's side. "You dare?" the Duke hissed, his voice snake-quiet. Harik hit him again. The blow amounted to nothing. Harik jerked backwards, the blade sliding free of his flesh as he brought his sword up in a guard. "You come to my chambers with bloody intentions? Don't you know who I am?"

"I do," Harik assured him, eyeing the Duke's knife unhappily. "That's why I'm in your chambers."

"A mistake," the Duke hissed. His eyes flashed red, the same color as the Stone of Souls. Apparently, the necklace *was* magical. The smallfolk had been correct about the abilities it gave the Duke, after all. In the Duke's hands, the blade shimmered and stretched, reshaped into a sword by some sorcerous power. The Duke charged without hesitation, attacking in a flurry of blows. Harik blocked them easily, no longer caught unawares, but managed to land no strikes of his own. They danced around the room, blades striking the old wood furniture as the infant's wails provided a deafening background to the fight. Sweat ran down Harik's flanks and the back of his neck. The Duke stood against blows that should have knocked a human man to the ground, his eyes growing brighter and brighter as the fight went on. Of Riette, Harik saw not a sign. Perhaps she had fled. He had no time to look for her. Not when his foot slipped on a smear of his spilled blood.

The Duke knocked aside Harik's sword in a heartbeat and cried out triumphantly. The Duke's weapon shifted again, forming a hooked dagger that he raised. He brought the dagger down towards Harik's throat just as a flash of brilliant copper shot behind his shoulder. Riette leapt upon the Duke's back, her weight having no effect on him, her expression set and grim. The Duke cried out and changed the angle of his blade, stabbing back wildly at Riette. The blade sliced along the curve of her bicep as Harik lunged for his sword, grabbed the handle, and drove the blade directly into the Duke's gut.

The blade stopped before it could pierce the Duke's flesh, as though he were made of marble. The impact jarred Harik's shoulders. Above him, the Duke laughed and kicked out. "You can't—" the Duke began, exulting, only to wheeze to a stop when Riette seized the chain holding the Stone of Souls with both hands and hauled backwards.

The chain dug into the Duke's throat and the man cried out gutturally, stabbing back at Riette once more. Harik surged back up to wrestle for the blade. The three of them crashed drunkenly around the room, tangled together. The Duke's face grew red and then purple. He released the knife and scrambled at Riette's arms, his fingers curled like claws, before he finally fell to his knees. Riette's weight drove him all the way to the ground at last, and she sat there, astride his shoulders, her hands wrapped so tightly around the chain that blood slid from between her purpled fingers.

Harik sucked in a breath and touched Riette's shoulder. She looked up at him, snarling, and he said, "Sh, sh, it's alright. It's finished. Come." He helped her stand, and she hissed at the wounds across her arms.

"Magic," she spat, and Harik snorted a laugh. He crouched beside the Duke and rolled the man over. He had only a moment to notice the Duke's furiously glowing eyes before the man's arm shot out and he dug his fingers into Harik's throat like talons. Harik choked, beating at the Duke. Somewhere Riette yelled. The baby still screamed. The Stone of Souls glowed like a dragon's gullet in the hollow of the Duke's throat. Riette dropped beside them, swearing,

with Harik's sword in her hands. She drove the point of the blade down, directly through the Stone.

The magical gem shattered.

The blade slid right through the shards and the Duke's neck, thunking to a stop against the stone floor. The Duke gurgled once; his hand fell away from Harik's throat. Riette poked at the broken shards and grumbled, "Well, there goes my bounty."

Harik laughed.

Harik and Riette managed to stand after a moment, leaning on one another in the ruin of the Duke's chamber. The baby continued to scream on the bed. It possessed impressive lung capacity. "Someone will probably come for it," Riette said, after they stared at the infant for a moment.

"No," Harik answered. No one who knew the Duke would want to find the infant in the morning. Some things no one wanted to see.

Riette sighed. She limped over to the mattress and, after frowning at the child doubtfully, reached down and gathered it up. "Get the sword," she said, holding the infant awkwardly. "I'm not in the mood to mess about with anyone else."

It took little effort to find the child's mother. The other kitchen maids were only too happy to fetch her—red faced and puffy-eyed—once they finished screaming at the sight of Harik and Riette. The girl took the babe and wandered off, hopefully to get it to stop crying. The rest of the awoken staff stared at Riette and Harik, but mostly at Harik's bloody sword.

Guards stood around them, holding weapons but not yet attacking. "So," one of the guards finally asked, casting an anxious look upward, "the Duke…?"

"Dead," Riette said, shortly. She pointed after the retreating mother and child. "But I believe he left an heir."

"Oh," the guard said, looking around, an expression very much like relief breaking across his features. An older woman exclaimed loudly and sat down on the floor. The rest of those gathered broke into excited whispers. "Well. That's… Good, then."

One of the maids tittered nervously and asked, "Would you like some drinks? To celebrate the birth of our new Duke?"

In the end, Harik and Riette ate and drank for the better part of the day. The celebration continued as they moved out of the keep, but Harik had other contracts to fulfill, and Riette no doubt had business of her own. She'd earned no gold for her part in the excitement, after all. They could have left separately, but Harik lingered around, following Riette to the stables where they readied their horses in silence.

"Well," Riette said, throwing a last bag across her horse's back. "I suppose this is where we say goodbye." She looked up at Harik. The bruising on her face had really come in over the last few hours. She looked grim.

Harik opened his mouth and then tilted his head to the side. "It doesn't have to be," he said.

Riette's eyes narrowed. "What?"

Harik shrugged. "We worked well together," he said, picking his words with care. "I could get used to

having a thief around. And besides, I feel it'd be only fair to split the bounty on the Duke's head with you."

Riette stared up at him. "I did lose the Stone of Souls," she said, slowly. "I could use some help explaining that to the wizard. You know how they can be when they don't get their way. And you seem to know your way around a sword."

Harik grinned. "Well then," he said, offering out his hand. "Partners?"

Riette took his hand. Her small fingers curled around his palm and she squeezed. "What the hell," she said. "Partners."

Copyright © 2019 J.S. Rogers

# dill

by

## max sheridan

"The elements are all here: A memorable cast of characters wherein even the minor actors are given weight, a compelling and original road story, the precise amount of description to keep that southwestern sun bearing down on your shoulders at all times, and a fluid prose that allows the reader to turn the pages with the ease of an El Camino cruising across a battered American highway."

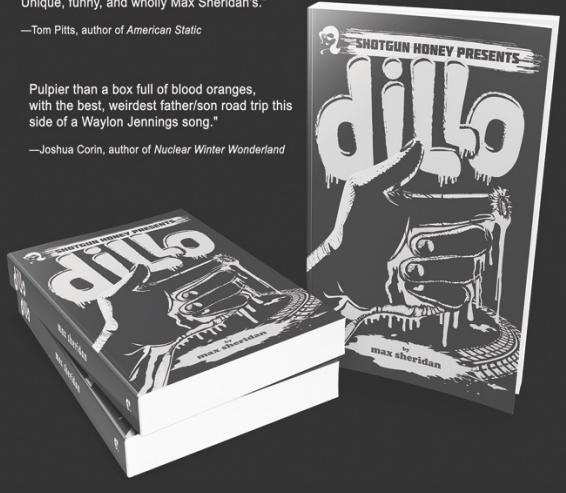
—Alec Cizak, author of *Down on the Street*

"A fresh voice taking on uncharted portions of the American literary landscape. Unique, funny, and wholly Max Sheridan's."

—Tom Pitts, author of *American Static*

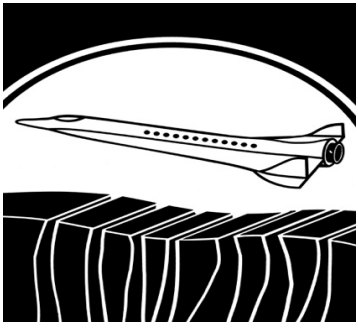
Pulpier than a box full of blood oranges, with the best, weirdest father/son road trip this side of a Waylon Jennings song."

—Joshua Corin, author of *Nuclear Winter Wonderland*



# SERVICE AT SUNFLOWER PLANET

## J.L Boekestein



*Your Death is Our Business*, said Hansen Curilius' business card. Actually it was not completely true, it was what happened to the client's body after his or her demise that was Hansen Curilius' business: he provided special funeral services, no matter how elaborate the demands or how obscure the rituals. Gods, demons or any other creature in the multiverse, he could arrange the funeral they – or their remaining loved ones – wished for.

Two things the little undertaker did not do: murder or assisted suicide. There once was that unfortunate misunderstanding with a fifth dimensional Undying Lord of Eternal Gloom who desperately wanted to end his own existence. Hansen referred him to Mr. Morty's Permanent Solution Company. Mr. Morty and his associates were well respected assassins who tried to keep bodies intact.

Hansen Curilius was a big fan of their work because it made his own job so much easier. Mr. Morty himself was pleased by the extra business and soon he referred his clients to Hansen Curilius for a stylish well executed funeral with an iron clad no-resurrection guarantee. What Mr. Morty or his associates killed and what Hansen Curilius put to rest, stayed dead. You could bet someone's life on that. Even your own if you paid extra.

The funeral parlour was situated in City-At-the-Crossroads-of-the-Worlds, in the best artisan quarter at the feet of Three Moon Hill: a small, tasteful three store building done in black marble. Hansen Curilius aimed for an air of stylish professionalism fit for any Higher or Lower Being that wanted a funeral. Due to hard work, dedication and a certain flair Hansen Curilius had succeeded. Business was good, his reputation was flawless and his family life was as harmonious as it could be. Hansen Curilius was married to his sensible wife Mary, and was father of three kids: silent Lilith who took after her mother, adventurous Absinthe and the young Hansen jr.

Yes, Hansen Curilius was quite content with his life and business.

One day, the undertaker received the widow Thunderer-Strawberrycheecks of Sunflower Planet to talk about her husband's funeral. He sat her down in his office and nodded while the client told her story. The blonde widow had been one those love goddesses who went for outrageous sexual endeavours instead of concentrating on the homely side of love. They usually ended up marrying elder gods and cheating the hell out of them with

everything that was substantial enough to touch. Pulse or not.

Hansen Curilius was not sure if Goddess Eva Strawberrycheeks did the whole cheating-and-jumping-everything-in-sight thing, but she sure had been married to All Father Votkan the Thunderer, and she absolutely radiated pure sensuous lust. The short black dress and heavy veil did not dampen the effect in the slightest.

That was why Mary was present. She trusted her husband completely, but one could never be too careful with love goddesses. They could not help what they were, after all. The sluts.

"I am not aware of any arrangements," the late Mrs, Thunderer said. Her voice was like a sultry summer evening's wind, dripping with honey, exotic massage oils and whispered promises. "Votkie… well, he expected to live forever, you know. And so did I. Or at least to the end of the multiverse."

"It happens to soon to all of us," Hansen Curilius said and without noticing himself he reached out to take the widow's hand and comfort her in a professional manner.

Mary pinched him hard and Hansen Curilius retracted his hand. Ouch! That had been close. You had to be careful with those love goddesses! "Of course you want to do right by your late husband's death, don't you?"

"I… Yes, I do." Eva Strawberrycheeks sobbed. "I don't know! I don't know what to do! Luckily I have had so *much* support from *everyone*, but I don't know what Votkie wanted."

"That is where we come in," Hansen Curilius assured the love goddess. "We can arrange a funeral worthy of an All Father! For example…"

After widow Thunderer-Strawberrycheeks had left, Hansen Curilius called out to his kids, Lilith, Absinthe and Hansen jr.: "Get your stuff, loves! We have a service to perform at Sunflower planet. We have a thunder god to be burry."

"Not another dull service on some backward planet!" Of course it was Absinthe, the rebellious one of the Hansen Curilius' three children. The little undertaker loved his second daughter, but secretly he suspected her heart was not really in the undertaker's business. Now Lilith showed real skill and interest in embalming and persevering the deceased and Hansen Curilius jr. had a real knack for remembering and performing the most complex of grieving and funeral rituals. Lilith instead was more interested in getting in trouble. Once he had caught her climbing the Ice Cliffs of Hargulkdolk right before a service, another time she was running around with some Goblin children planning to steal a few bottles of firewater from the kitchen of the Dark Witch of Dustwood. Hansen Curilius had been hired to bury the Lady's twelfth, no… thirteenth husband. Stealing firewater? Well, he could understand that, but Goblins? Really?

"Yes, we are going and you are coming," Hansen Curilius told his daughter. "No buts and no maybe's. Make sure to pack your black cowls, and they better be clean and pressed this time!"

Absinthe opened her mouth, but closed it again, knowing that would get her nowhere. *Burying a dead God? Booooring!*

It was dark at Sunflower Planet. The whole planet was dark, because they were mourning the death of their All Father. Hansen Curilius nodded happily. It was so much easier to organize a good funeral when there was a decent *décor*. Ink dark clouds and never ending showers of ice rain put everyone in the right mood. Very important.

For the burial Mrs. Thunderer-Strawberrycheeks had chosen Mount Scream, a single dead volcano surrounded by the Plane of Crushed Hero's. Mount Scream housed a bunch of epic treasures, one of those secrets that would unleash universal Armageddon, a vile dragon and a few ancient curses. The Plane of Crushed Hero's was a desert of dead hero's bones trying to take one of the treasures, find the secret, slay the dragon or undo the curses. Hansen Curilius had to admit it was an excellent place to bury a dead god, but getting the guardians of the treasures, the demon on whose body the Armageddon Secret was tattooed, the vile dragon and the manifestations of the curses to cooperate was a real pain in the neck. It usually was, but Hansen Curilius ran a first class business and in the end he prevailed. All Father Votkan the Thunderer would be buried on Mount Scream without any interruptions.

The night before the service, Hansen Curilius talked the whole thing trough with Mary, like he always did. The spouses were in bed of their mobile home, a hot coco at hand. Mary looked at her husband over her reading glasses. "I caught Absinthe today snogging with one of the local boys. Some demon fire spirit."

"We can't have that!" Hansen Curilius said. "Tomorrow we need three singing virgins! It is in the contract. Lilith and Hansen jr. on their own are not enough! Tell me you stopped her before it got any further."

"Of course dear! Absinthe is not stupid, she is only trying out a few things. But one day you are going to lose her to some boy. Absinthe is very adventurous. She takes after my uncle Ixander."

"I certainly hope not! Hero is just another word for wandering bum, only with better press. I don't want our second daughter wandering around the universe fighting Gods know what and doing all those things the bards sing about. Did we not raise her to be a good girl?"

Mary touched her husband's arm. "Don't speak nonsense now, love. Sooner or later Absinthe is going to do what she wants. You better get used to that idea. Maybe we should help her, sent her to some martial arts nunnery. If she starts adventuring she should know how to use a sword or keep her breath for an hour."

"I don't like it!" Hansen Curilius said stubbornly.

"I know you don't, but you better get used to it. One day she will be gone. We should start thinking about a replacement. One virgin, cheap, who can sing. Maybe even a few extra, if you can find them. We have to plan for the future. Our children grow up so quickly."

The little undertaker knew he already had lost the argument. He could arrange carpets to fly in formation and make lich kings dance the tarantella, but going against his wife was hopeless. His arguments were like waves breaking on the unmoving

boulders of her sensibility. He grumbled: "I will check a few slave markets, but I am sure they don't come cheap."

"We will find a solution, dear. We always manage," Mary concluded. "Now, about tomorrow, I will receive the guest and get them seated. You wait in the Heavens with the deceased and the Valkyries."

"And the widow?" Hansen Curilius asked, a little bit worried. He had dreamt a few times about widow Strawberrycheeks. Being alone with her was definitely a bad idea. The things she could do with a single feather… Those dreams were disturbingly erotic.

"No, the widow will be waiting at Mount Scream. I get everyone seated and…"

The sound of a thousand horns rose to the Heavens, the dark clouds parted and a golden pillar of sunlight illuminated Mount Scream. Legions of Valkyries on their winged horses swarmed out, banging their shields with their swords. Lighting crackled and scores of Soul Wolves, gathered around the mountain, howled in union. The funeral guests, a huge crowd of Gods, demi-gods, hero's, spirits and other Beings, were seated at the foot of Mount Scream in some huge yurts with roaring fires to keep the cold out. Kegs of mead, roasted pigs and dancing girls waited for the après funeral feast.

Seated behind Llyx the Sun Messenger, Hansen Curilius rode the hearse with All Father Votkan the Thunderer's coffin. The casket was a huge, made of the finest woods and metals that the planet had to offer. Scenes from the dead god's life were depicted on the sides and lid. Votkan fighting the Swarm Beast

of the Ur Marshes. Votkan burning the homestead of the Jinglud Giants, screaming women and babes trapped inside while their husbands laid dead outside. Votkan drinking from the Endless Cup that Cunning Slemal had handed him, followed by a scene with Votkan forcing a drink of molten gold down the throat of Cunning Slemal. Votkan giving life to lower races by spilling his seed in the mud when he tried to rape the Maiden of Thorn Wood.

Votkan had been a busy god and although the stories had a certain primitive picturesque charm, Hansen Curilius focussed on the funeral.

The hearse landed on the platform in front of the cave's entrance. Eva Strawberrycheeks waited there, golden haired, radiant and definitely more love Goddess then grieving widow, even in her long dress of night black lace and a heavy veil made from morning fog and sulphur smoke. She was accompanied by two huge Iron Warriors with dragon scale armour and horned helmets covering their whole face. At the side of the platform three small hooded figures waited, Lilith, Absinthe and Hansen jr. Suddenly it was silent at Mount Scream, the whole world seemed to wait.

Three ethereal voices rose to the Heavens, eerie, soothing and chilling at the same time. Hansen Curilius' face did not betray any emotion, but he was proud of his children. Their performance had, as always, a huge impact. It was the much needed counter point to all the bombastic nonsense gods, demons and other beings always insisted on for their funeral service. They lived with much sound and fury, they usually died with much sound and fury and they always wanted their farewell to have as much sound

and fury as possible. In such a maelstrom of impressions it was important that have a quiet moment of introspection.

The three voices died down, once more silence reigned.

Hansen Curilius nodded to the two guards, it was time to carry the coffin into the cave. Usually this was the time for speeches, but none had asked to speak. All Father Votkan the Thunderer was a God whose deeds spoke loud enough.

The guards lifted the huge coffin from the hearse. While Llyx the Sun Messenger took off, the two huge warriors carried the All Father to his last resting place. Behind her veil Eva Strawberrycheeks made sobbing sounds. "Oh Votkie, Oh Votkie!"

Hansen Curilius followed the guards, the dead God and his widow into the tomb. The funeral was almost over and so far everything had gone without a glitch.

Eternal torches lid the interior, a rough cave adorned with the skulls of old enemies and a collection of broken weapons. The guards put down the coffin in upright position, even in death the All Father was not lying down. In the privacy of the tomb the widow had stopped crying. She had put her veil back and her lovely, lustful face was showing something close to a triumphant smile.

Hansen Curilius carefully stayed at the opening of the tomb. He was not needed in the last moments between man and wife. Besides, he did not trust himself enough to come near the Love Goddess. Dealing with the staff he had heard plenty of rumours. If only half of them were true, it was not

beneath the Love Goddess to use the last resting place of her late husband for an adulterous tryst.

Outside the tomb Hansen Curilius heard some whispering. When he turned around he saw Lilith, Absinthe and Hansen jr. peeking around the corner of the tomb. Hansen Curilius put his fingers to his lips but did not sent his offspring away. As long as the three rascals kept quiet and out of sight they were welcome to watch the final rituals. It was important that they learned as much as possible of the art of well executed funeral.

From the tomb came a grunt and Hansen Curilius turned around again, just in time to see one of the guards go down with blood dripping from under his armour. The other guard stood behind him, holding a bloody dagger.

"Wow!" one of his kids said, Hansen Curilius thought it was Absinthe. The little undertaker frowned. The guards were supposed to be sealed in the tomb with the All Father. A blood sacrifice was not in the script, unless this was a last minute add on to the funeral nobody told him about. Such improvisations were a burden, but a good undertaker knew how to flexible and how to improvise.

From the puzzled face of Eva Strawberrycheeks it was clear she was not sure about the bloodletting either.

The remaining guard waved at Hansen Curilius that everything was all right. At his leisure the armoured warrior picked up one of those full automatic crossbows with a magazine of nine bolts. They were prohibited on most worlds, but Hansen Curilius was not sure about the weapon laws of Sunflower Planet. Anyway, he was an undertaker, not

a constable. He did a few steps back, ready to dart out of the tomb if necessary. Sometimes in the heat of the moment people got carried away with those sacrifices.

The warrior stepped towards the Love Goddess, took her shoulder and threw her against the upright coffin of All Father Votkan the Thunderer. With eight quick and precise shots he nailed her to the casket with bolts in her shoulders, arms, thighs and feet.

Eva Strawberrycheeks screamed and screamed, but the warrior took his time to inspect his work. Apparently satisfied he laid down the crossbow and walked out of the tomb. He pulled a lever in the wall and a five-ton slate of stone came down, closing the tomb behind him. The high pitched screaming of the Love Goddess no doubt continued, but the sound was sealed in forever.

Two passes from Hansen Curilius the warrior stopped and took of his helm, revealing a handsome face. A thin moustache adorned his upper lip and his hair was combed back in immaculate rows. This was clearly a man who took care of his appearance.

"Please don't be alarmed, Mr. Curilius. Allow me to introduce myself, my name is Mr. Morty. I am delighted to finally meet you in person."

"I hope I have not inconvenienced you in any way, Mr. and Mrs. Curilius," Mr. Morty said after putting down the fine china cup. Clearly the assassin enjoyed his tea. Fairy Wing Breath was an excellent blend that Hansen Curilius had imported from the beyond the Dark Worlds. "I respect for your business I waited as long as possible, but my contract with All

Father Votkan the Thunderer stated clearly that, and I quote: 'the murdering adulterous she-dog' should be nailed to his coffin to join his eternal rest. My client was very specific about that in his secret will and you understand that put me in a bit of a spot when I learned you were performing the service. Still, I had to honour a contract. I hope you understand."

"We understand completely," Hansen Curilius assured his guest, "and we absolutely appreciate you waiting for the very end of the service. It all was a bit unexpected but it actually fitted in quite well with the whole arrangement. It seems all Father Votkan the Thunderer's character was on the crueller side of the spectrum and one could argue that all this was his last wish and thence part of the whole funeral."

"And the service was pre-paid fully," Mary added. "We always insist on that."

Mr. Morty smiled his pearl white smile. "I am so glad there are no hard feelings between us, we all are hard working professionals trying to cater for specific wishes of our clientele. It would really hurt me personally if our relationship would suffer from the conflicting wishes of our customers."

Hansen Curilius smiled too. "Such thing would indeed hurt my feelings too. We harbour no hard feelings Mr. Morty. On the contrary, you have impressed us very much. One member of family especially and that is why we invited you."

The slender assassin raised one eyebrow. "I blush under your praise, dear sir and madam, and I have to say I am intrigued. Please elaborate!"

Now Mary started to speak: "Mr. Morty, we have a daughter, Absinthe. A good girl, but with a bit of an adventurous streak in her soul. After what happened

on Mount Scream she showed a real interest in the line of work you are doing. We wondered, could you use an apprentice?"

Mr. Morty nodded slowly and smiled. "I think we can come to an arrangement."

The two spouses looked at each other, relief in their eyes. They were pleased. Very pleased indeed. Finally a safe and decent occupation for their daughter.

And of course it could never hurt to have someone providing fresh clients for the family business.

Copyright © 2019 J.L. Boekestein

PRO SE SINGLE SHOT

# THE NEON GLARE

BY SCOTCH RUTHERFORD

# THE ELDRITCH MUSE

## Hatebreaker

You misunderstood me, Father. I might have let slip that I do believe in a higher power, but I didn't mean the one you represent and even if I did, I doubt He would be able to save me or anyone else, not after what I've seen, not after what I know is out there. A confession? That's what you thought this was? A confession implies guilt over what I did. If anything, I'm remorseful over not having done enough. A sinful act? You think I committed a sinful act? Bah! What I did was for the sake of all mankind, including the murderers and dealers within these walls. What is the death of one person when the fate of the entire human race is at stake?

Did they tell you I did it over drugs? Come on, do I look like any kind of user? That artist barely knew Picasso from a grease stain, let alone where to

buy narcotics. If anything, I'm glad to be in here. Places like this, overflowing with sin, are the last on the list of targets for what's coming. Although, steel and concrete will hold them back only for so long. It's for this reason I never made trouble while in here, until that day at lunch. You've read the file. I didn't hurt the guy that bad. With any luck, the grease burns will keep him away from that monster of a cellmate he has. I just had to destroy that tattoo, that hateful…this doesn't convince you of anything, does it? For what little good it will do, I guess I can give you the whole story, then maybe you will understand.

I would have called myself a writer by trade not ten years ago, but that would have been a lie meant to distance myself from my employment as an insurance clerk. I published a few pieces for some horror anthologies and magazines, but most were rarely accepted, let alone praised. All of that changed when I finally decided to buy the Lovesett house. It had been standing there in the otherwise sitcom perfect neighborhood, sheltered mostly by that ancient, tall, twisted maple that was as wide as a van and towered over the manor so it was always in shadow, even at high noon in winter. I managed to buy the house real cheap. As a child, I remember everyone being afraid to go near it, even myself, and I had the guts to put my hand into the tarantula tank in science class. I think it was that moment as a child that began my fascination with what could bring out fear in others. I wish it had also resulted in a spark of talent.

I would later brag to the press that the house was hundreds of years old, going back to somewhere in colonial time when witches were still being hanged. I even told them a witches' Sabbath had been held

there on more than one occasion. The truth is most of that was false, but only because the stuff I could find was too hard to believe. There are stories of witches in this area and around that house, but nothing like the Salem witch trials had ever occurred. Everyone knew better than to cross these witches. Crops not only failing but also bursting into flames and taking the owner's home with them were just some of the stories I found buried in the history no one wants to remember. I heard there were some unexplained murders during the 1920s. Hippies who tried to commune with a higher power there during the Age of Aquarius were never seen again. The one consistency throughout all of these years was that anyone who had anything to do with that house seemed doomed to a mysterious and frightening end. I thought myself not so much immune to the curse but as to having nothing left to lose. The owner before me wouldn't give his name and only contacted me through agents, so I can't say who he was. He had left the place undisturbed since the 1980s. I spent my first few weeks there dusting and cleaning out all manner of junk.

I think it was my thirteenth night there when I noticed my first unusual occurrence. It was just a quick glance of something like a lady's long skirt moving quickly into the shadow reflected in a mirror. Then the next day, I could have sworn I saw a face staring back at me while I brought some boxes into the basement. It gave me a start, not only because no one but me had been in that house for weeks, but because the face was that of a woman, the kind they put on the covers of those film noir movies. Pale white skin, lips as luscious as cherries and a lock of

blonde hair covering one eye. I saw it for only a moment before I flipped on the lights. Then there was nothing.

After a while, I saw her wherever I went in the house, always silent, always mostly in the shadow. The day I decided to give writing one more chance was when we went from just seeing each other to actual interaction. I was busy struggling with my latest story under only the light of my laptop and desk lamp when I got my first complete glimpse of her. She was as slender, curved and beautiful as I imagined her to be every time I had seen her in the past. As usual, she didn't say a thing, merely put a finger to her lips, turned my head back to the computer screen, and began to rub my shoulders.

Every writer strives to find that feeling of flow. That sensation of there no longer being the writing tool between author and paper. When the smaller scenes and sentences of dialogue connect together to form higher concepts and feelings. These moments have always been few and far between for me. Until she touched me. As soon as she did this, it was as if I had been digging through mere rock for years and finally struck the richest vein of gold. Now it was all I could do to keep up with the flood of details that connected themselves like magnetic puzzle pieces. It was addictive how everything seemed possible, how easily words led to scenes and people become real for those who read the pages.

In only a matter of a month, I published my first full book, and my career changed overnight. Everyone who had the slightest interest in experiencing fear read it, and all they could do was praise its ability to chill the blood. From there I made

piece after piece and received praise after praise, luring the horror public deeper into the seemingly endless abyss of ever-varying terrors. I saw in every object and every shadow a nugget of possibility, which I and I alone, could refine into beautifully horrific masterpieces of words. I do confess to looking back at this time, regardless of what I know, as the most fulfilling time in my life. But I should have known that I was eating from a silver platter being held up by a snake.

It was on the night after my first negotiations for the movie rights of my most popular book, when I was finally coming home. I had gotten out of my car when the lightning began to crack overhead from the layer of clouds that had been covering the sky all day. I would not have stayed in the house if it didn't still have the power to thrill me, even after all of that time. However, on this day I felt a chill more intense than before, as if for some reason the sense of impending fear was stronger than it had ever been.

As I entered the house, about to remove my coat, I realized how cold it was. I was certain there was something moving in the shadows, like the dragging tail of some large animal, or was it just a trick of the light from the swaying tree outside? I didn't want to know, but I could hazard a guess. I entered the living room and reached for the lamp when a flash of lightning lit up the room. I saw her standing there silently as I had a thousand times before. But something was different this time. The flash of lighting showed her in more light than I had ever seen her before. Behind her were other things. Strange things, hideous things, things defiant of any natural law of our world. I can spare you the exact

descriptions for I never saw them for more than a glance. I saw the woman, my muse, my gem of fantasy for the first time in her true detail when I turned on the light. I saw her only a few times as the light flickered and then died, but what I saw has infected my mind and I must do all I can to suppress thinking about it at every moment. Do you know about those fish in the deepest parts of the ocean? The ones that have those little lights on the ends of their own fishing line? They use them to bring prey in close through the abyss so they can be caught and devoured by grotesquely enlarged teeth. My muse can best be described as one of those same lights. I dare not say what else she was. She didn't say anything, as always, but I understood everything.

Many have thought back to before the atomic bomb was created, a time without such a destructive force unleashed upon the world, before that genie was let out of the bottle. Now that those ideas are out in the world, there's no stopping what they can do. I had done even worse. Through my written word, I had built the bridge from the realm beyond our comprehension, and led the way for them to become a part of our culture, our minds. These entities were already beginning their infection by that time, and the movie that was in the works would be the start of their beachhead. One I had built.

I don't know how I got away. After that horrifying moment, everything blurred. Gasoline from the garage found its way into my hands and was thrown all over the house. Fire was set to it in several places. The whole house went up in flames. Some kind of scream came from within the burning structure, but it was nothing close to a human sound.

I didn't care that almost all of my worldly possessions were within that house, including original manuscripts, photo albums of my long dead family, writing awards, my clothes. If this were the place where these things could come in from their world, it could not be allowed to stand. It had to burn as soon as possible no matter the cost.

After that, I was wandering through the woods, eating whatever I could get my hands on. I'm pretty sure I got good at it. I had to. The broken fragments of my mind had come to the decision that as long as I was away from civilization, out in the thickest parts of ancient forests, where man may never have tread even once, there was hope for the whole world, for if I couldn't be in a position to bring forth the abominations being broadcast into my brain, then there was hope. There was safety.

I could have lived out there forever. Then I saw it. I should have known that all wilderness has borders with civilization, no matter how small the wall. Someone said it was one of those cabins in the woods used as retreats for those wanting solitude. I didn't know at the time and merely chose to go towards the one I saw, thinking there might be some still edible garbage or something worth scavenging. Why did he have to do it? Why did a twenty-year old have to decide to take up painting of all things and choose to do it out there? What did someone with the money to burn on a private cabin truly know about suffering or art? I crouched as I approached the window, moving as silently as a cat, when upon the absurdly large canvas that my soon-to-be victim was feverishly painting, in exquisite detail, was standing my muse.

Copyright © 2019 Hatebreaker

# BLUE ANGEL

## A.B. Patterson

The man's penis and scrotum were barbecued, looking like the charcoal scraps in your griller that the dog wouldn't even touch. His throat was slashed, but strangely: half cut and half burnt, as if he'd been sliced open with an arc welder. But it was the fixed look of terror in his open eyes that most captured the attention of Inspector Aldo DiLernia. In all his years slogging the detective beat around Turin, he'd never seen anything like it.

He stepped back from the car, parked in a lay-by on the main road between Turin and Asti. He ordered the forensic officers to start their work. He looked up at the limpid sky, a frigid breeze blowing down from the Alps to the north. The atmosphere had this eerie bluish-green tinge to it. He frowned. Maybe it was just another effect of global warming. Or perhaps the fertiliser factory over in the next valley had finally

paid sufficient bribes to the regulators to be allowed to resume its polluting activity. Mind you, this was a haze like he'd never seen before. Today was one for new experiences, it seemed.

Aldo brought his eyes back to street level. He scanned the leafless, wintry roadside. Two of the Nigerian prostitutes who plied their trade along this road were standing about fifty metres away, watching him and his colleagues from the National Police.

Aldo started walking towards the girls. With the air temperature struggling to hit ten degrees Celsius, they looked out of place in their short skirts, boob tubes only half covered with anoraks, and high heels. He guessed fleecy track-suits and woolly jumpers weren't exactly enticing apparel for streetwalkers. This stretch of road had become notorious as the working strip for the increasing wave of young women being trafficked in from Nigeria. Meagre payments to their impoverished families with promises of jobs in Europe as waitresses or hairdressers. Of course, the reality was definitely not free meals for working in a restaurant, and the nearest these girls got to anyone's head was a mouthful of cock. And for an average price of ten euros. Intercourse was usually twenty, and a further ten got you anal. The debts the girls had to pay off to the traffickers of carnal misery were ten times what their families had received. It was years of selling themselves before they'd be free from their enslavement. That's if they survived the violence and diseases. And to top it off, the witchdoctors back home had bestowed bad juju on them, convincing them deaths in their families would result if they didn't comply with their traffickers.

Fuck, thought Aldo, the damage these primitive superstitions could do to the young, the gullible and the naïve. Then he considered it wasn't much different from the Catholic Church, the pride and joy of his own country. He shook his head.

'Hi, girls.' He held out his badge.

The pair of sad, ebony faces nodded at him.

'Speak Italian?'

'Yes,' replied the older of the two.

'Your names?'

'I'm Bella,' she said. 'This my cousin, Sunshine.'

Aldo nodded and scribbled in his notebook.

'I'm not here to give you any trouble. I just want to ask you about the dead man in the car.'

'A bad man, officer. He hurt Beauty. She gone to hospital.'

'So did Beauty kill the man?' asked Aldo. It was a routine question, although probably pointless given the injuries were hardly anything these girls had the means to perpetrate.

'Not Beauty. It is Sapphire.'

'Who's Sapphire?'

'A girl. Dead girl. It is her spirit.'

Fuck, thought Aldo, more superstitious crap.

'Was Sapphire from Nigeria?'

'No. She Italian. She killed here last year.'

Aldo did recall that there had been a murder of a street girl a few months ago. He'd been away at a training course in Rome at the time, so another Inspector had handled the case. Briefly, anyway. Headquarters' attitude was that dead prostitutes were no great loss, and police resources were better used on worthwhile citizens. Aldo hated headquarters and all the self-important wankers that filled its offices.

'What do you mean "her spirit"?' he asked Bella.

'She is our angel. She bring good juju when men are bad to us. You see the blue air? That is Sapphire.'

Aldo knew he was going nowhere with this. He pocketed his notebook.

'Thanks, girls.' He looked at their sad faces and scrawny limbs. 'Have you eaten today?'

'No, not many customers,' said Sunshine.

Aldo pulled out his wallet and gave each of them a fifty-euro note. Their devastated eyes sparked with a glimmer of joy.

'Wander into town and get yourselves a good meal,' he said.

Bella touched his arm. 'Thank you. You good man.'

He turned and walked back dejectedly to his car, pondering the cruelty and tragedy of life.

Bella climbed up into the cab of the semi-trailer.

'Hello, I'm Bella,' she said to the truckie.

He smiled at her. 'I'm Giulio. How much for a blow job?'

'Ten euros.'

'You swallow?'

'If you like.'

'I like.' He handed her a ten-euro note and undid his belt and the zipper of his rancid jeans, with their designer pattern of coffee and hamburger grease.

Bella thought his body odour was bad enough, but the fetid smell steaming up from his crotch as she lowered her face to his cock was enough to make her gag. He was gentle, however, stroking her head as she sucked him off. He groaned as he blew his load.

When she'd swallowed the last of his gism, she sat up again. As she did so, she glimpsed a blue figure floating in the air next to the driver's window.

'Thank you, that was excellent,' said Giulio. He stroked her face and gave her another ten-euro note. 'A tip, my Bella.'

She smiled at him: the special, genuine smile she reserved for the good clients. 'Thank you. See you again, maybe?'

'Yes. I will be driving this route every Monday. See you next week.'

As Bella climbed down out of the cab, the blue apparition drifted away, smiling at her.

'Thank you, Sapphire,' said Bella, waving to the ghost.

The next month saw Inspector DiLernia and his team attending two further dead men in vehicles on the highway. The same MO: burnt genitals and throats cut with a hot, sharp object. The lab technicians weren't able to pinpoint any particular weapon; they'd never seen anything like it either. Nor had the central forensic lab in Rome. Checks with Europol, Interpol and the FBI had proved fruitless. And to make Aldo's life worse, his arsehole of a boss, Assistant Inspector General Marco Branchini, was starting to breathe down his neck. Whilst no one upstairs gave a damn about butchered prostitutes, dead male customers were rated more highly. Plus news of a serial killer on the loose in the Turin area was starting to impact on the region's tourism prospects.

Aldo got off the phone from his call with Branchini thinking it was more to do with the wanker's prospects for promotion, rather than any concern for the district's economy. Or for the dead men and their families for that matter.

Aldo sat at his desk, flicking through the file on the murdered prostitute, Chiara Vecchio. He looked at her photo: the one they'd got from her parents, not the ones taken by the forensic photographer. She had the blonde hair of northern Italy and the most piercing, brilliant, azure blue eyes. He could see how her street name came about.

She was just nineteen when she died. She'd bled out in the ditch beside the highway. A broken bottle had been rammed up her vagina repeatedly. The same weapon was then used to slash her throat and carve the word 'WHORE' into her forehead. The local newspaper had received a call from a man claiming to be representing some group called Christians Against Whores. The caller said there would be more dead prostitutes.

Yeah, very fucking Christian, thought Aldo. Fucking freaks.

Just as he was descending into melancholic thoughts about the short life and horrible death of Sapphire, his sergeant, Piero Rossi, came running into the office.

'Boss, we've got another one.'

'Oh, for fuck's sake!' yelled Aldo.

As he grabbed his jacket and got up to follow Piero out to their car, he thought of his little cottage in the hills behind the Amalfi Coast down south. It'd been advertised as a 'renovator's dream', and it certainly was. He went there whenever he had leave,

doing it up bit by loving bit. Now it was his plan for retirement, an event for which he was growing truly impatient.

Sunshine put a raunchy swagger into her gait as she walked towards the large, black Audi that had pulled in to the lay-by. The car looked very expensive so she hoped that would mean a tip. A balding, obese man in clothes as classy-looking as the car got out of the driver's door. He got into the back of the large vehicle, motioning Sunshine to join him.

She climbed in to the strong smell of leather and aftershave. The back of this car was bigger than her shared bedroom in the house the girls lived in. She closed the car door and turned around to the man, who already had his erect cock out of his trousers.

'Suck it,' he commanded.

As she lowered her mouth to his penis, she heard the click of the central locking. She never knew how to interpret that move. Some punters did it as they were worried about a pimp busting in and robbing them. Others, however, did it to stop the girls getting out. And that was never good.

Sunshine didn't have to wait long to find out which camp this guy fell into. After about fifteen seconds of sucking him, he pulled her head up violently by her hair and held her at arm's length. The slap he landed across her face was so hard it made her see stars. Suddenly she was face down on the seat, nearly suffocating in the leather cushioning. She felt her knickers being roughly torn off.

'No!' she tried to shout, but it just came out as a muffled grunt.

She tried screaming again when she felt her anus tear as the bastard forced his cock into her.

'Take this, you filthy black slut!'

He started viciously thrusting in and out.

It hurt like hell. Sunshine began crying into the leather.

Suddenly the car rocked violently, as if there was an earthquake. An explosion of blue light filled the car's interior. In one swift movement, Sunshine felt the man's penis come out of her and she was thrown against the car door, but by what she couldn't tell. She certainly couldn't feel the creep's hands on her any more. She collapsed onto the floor behind the front seat. She sniffed the air and wrinkled her nose. She realized she'd shat herself, sloppy faeces running down her thighs and onto the carpet. Then she regained enough composure to look up.

Fatman was sitting on the back seat with a glowing blue and naked young woman sitting astride him, her shimmering hand pinning his chest back against the seat. He'd lost his erection, his flaccid member now resembling a fat maggot. The look of terror on his face gave some satisfaction to Sunshine. The blue girl had jade green labia that swelled to the size of two bananas and started pulsating with light. The girl smiled. Then a blue flame roared out of her vagina. The smell of roasting flesh made Sunshine retch.

Fatman gave out a non-stop piercing shriek until his genitals were just an unrecognizable, blackened lump of meat. Then the girl's eyes blazed and two shafts of light like lasers shot out, converging into a single point on the man's throat. There was more smell of scorching meat as her ray beams burned an

incision across Fatman's throat. The light in his eyes went out, leaving lifeless pupils staring dead ahead, his face muscles locked in a rictus of fear.

The blue girl turned to look at Sunshine, reaching out and touching her cheek. Her hand felt warm and loving, not what Sunshine was used to.

'Thank you, Sapphire.'

The ghost smiled and then was gone, evaporating into the air.

Sunshine clambered out of the car, after emptying the cash and credit cards from Fatman's wallet. As she emerged onto the gravel lay-by, the atmosphere had taken on a blue-green hue. She jumped into the stormwater ditch as she heard another car approaching. It slowed down and stopped. She heard someone talking on a phone. She crept away along the ditch.

Twenty minutes later, Sunshine watched from the woods down the road as the police cars arrived. She recognized the nice policeman who had given her and her cousin money for dinner.

Aldo tried to breathe only through his mouth as he leant in to the back of the Audi, wanting to avoid smelling the revolting mixture of burnt flesh and human shit. He'd recognized the car as he and Piero walked up to it. He figured their job was about to get a lot more unpleasant with pressure from above. It was bad enough to have the unsolved killings of three men on his plate, but they were all relative nobodies. This one, however, was going to send the press into a frenzy, not to mention the police hierarchy.

Aldo looked at the body of the Deputy Mayor, Luigi Gangemi. Frankly, thought Aldo, no great loss: just another slime-ball politician with his corrupt snout in the trough of public money. However, Aldo knew only too well that the Establishment was never more enthusiastic than when it came to looking after its own.

'Piero, my friend, our lives are about to become hell.'

'Couldn't agree more, boss. Mind you, it's the first time I've seen this fat fuck without a smarmy grin on his face.'

Aldo managed a laugh. He had a lot of time for his irreverent sergeant, an increasingly rare specimen in the police these days: a man who was more interested in solving crimes than he was in getting promoted.

'And that attitude, Piero, is why I like you so much. It's also why you'll never get much higher in this fucked up police force.'

'Boss, believe me, looking at all those oxygen thieves back at headquarters, I'm very happy to retire as a sergeant.'

The word 'retire' had Aldo's thoughts drifting to his cottage down south. He had to pull himself back to reality.

'Okay, I'll ring his royal fucking highness, you organize forensics.'

'No problem,' replied Piero, gesturing at the team in their white coveralls standing by their van thirty metres away.

Aldo sat in the front passenger seat of their squad car and pulled out his mobile phone. He got

put straight through to the Assistant Inspector General.

'Good morning, sir . . .'

The big boss cut him off. 'Can't this wait, DiLernia? I'm due to meet the Commissioner shortly.'

'Just thought you should know, sir, that we've got another victim up on the highway.'

'Jesus Christ!' spat his boss. 'Perhaps if you'd hurry up and catch the maniac who's doing this, Inspector, we'd all be better off.'

More like you'd be better off for your next ill-deserved promotion, thought Aldo.

'So who is it this time, Inspector? Another truck driver, travelling salesman, or what?'

Aldo managed a wry grin as he delivered the news.

'No, sir. This one is Deputy Mayor Gangemi.'

The eruption was louder than Vesuvius.

'What the fucking fuck?!'

The yelling continued and Aldo held the phone away from his ear for a minute.

'Right,' yelled Branchini, in a fractionally lower tone. 'This goes nowhere, Inspector, complete silence, you understand? I'll take charge of all the media on this from now on.'

'Yes, sir.'

The phone went dead.

You rude fuck, thought Aldo. Anyway, fat chance of it staying silent. Aldo allowed himself a little chuckle as he looked over at his sergeant supervising the forensic officers. Piero was on his phone, a happy look on his face. That would mean Natalia, the recently arrived crime reporter on the local newspaper. She had a knack for breaking stories

before any of her competitors. Hardly surprising, really. She and Piero had quickly forged a mutually beneficial arrangement: she got scoops hot from the crime scenes; he got to discreetly enjoy her smoking hot body whenever her boyfriend wasn't around.

Aldo walked over to Piero.

'Give my regards to Natalia,' he said, grinning.

Piero blushed.

'Gotta go, babe, ciao.'

He put the phone back in his pocket.

'How did God Almighty take it?' he asked Aldo.

'I think I fucked up his pencil-pushing efforts for the day,' replied Aldo. 'Actually, I rather enjoyed it.'

'Guess we might get a sudden injection of resources,' said Piero.

'As sure as death, taxes, and nurses, my friend. Or in your case, as sure as a police reporter.'

'Ha ha,' said Piero, reddening again. 'Still, can always do with the overtime in the pay packet.'

'Good. Maybe you can shell out for a hotel room next time you bang Natalia, rather than stinking out the back seat of our squad car.' Aldo tried to look poker-faced.

Piero turned scarlet. 'But . . .'

Aldo slapped him on the shoulder.

'I know that lingering smell anywhere, my friend. I have had some back seat action in my time, too.'

Aldo smiled at his sheepish-looking sergeant. He pictured Natalia's sensational arse, her to-die-for breasts, and those magnificent chestnut brown tresses reaching to her waist. Yeah, he wouldn't mind banging Natalia himself.

Suddenly resources for the investigation became no object. It was always the case when one of the Establishment became a victim of crime. Aldo, Piero and the team were doing sixteen hour surveillance shifts, seven days a week, for the next fortnight.

They watched from their observation post a hundred metres away from the principal lay-by as girl after girl pulled trick after trick. The cars, vans and trucks always drove away, with a smiling male driver, business done. One of the trucks, a big rig with Polish number plates, had had a crew of two blokes. The detectives had watched through binoculars as the pair of Poles spit-roasted one of the street girls.

Still, for the last six days, all the transactions seemed to be friendly, or at least civil. But every single time a vehicle pulled in, a bizarre bluish haze settled over the area.

'Well, fuck me,' said Piero, peering through his field glasses at a gleaming white Maserati pulling into the lay-by. It was dusk on day seven of the surveillance operation.

'What?' said Aldo, opening his eyes from a short nap.

'Gianni Lucatelli himself. With all his money I'm surprised he wants this sort of dirty street action. Thought he'd be awash in high-class hookers.'

'It's twisted psychology, but some of these guys like to feel really sordid at times,' said Aldo, focusing his own binoculars. 'So, the richest cocaine dealer in northern Italy wants a little bit of roadside black pussy.'

Three Nigerian girls were sauntering towards the four-door sports car, trying to outswagger each other.

Lucatelli must have made his selection, because one of them climbed into the back seat. The drug baron changed from the driver's seat into the rear. The other two girls walked off.

The blue mist descended.

There was some flurried movement in the back of the Maserati. Had the detectives been close by, they might have heard the girl's screams. Instead they just saw an explosion of blue light. They did, however, hear the gunshots that followed. And then they saw the black girl stumble out of the car door and start running. The inside of the car was a blaze of blue radiance.

Piero started the engine and they raced up to the lay-by.

Gianni Lucatelli liked to hurt women. And not just emotionally. He liked to feel his hands actually inflicting pain. It reaffirmed his macho self-image of masculine power and control. Which is why he frequented the lower end of the whore market. These girls weren't likely to talk to the cops about being assaulted: that was a one-way ticket back to Africa or wherever else they came from. He liked to punch women half-unconscious before he fucked them. And whilst he could definitely afford the most expensive rental pussy on the planet, that class of whore did talk to the police.

He looked at the African slag sitting next to him. She was the very bottom end of the market. She was smiling at him, fluttering her eyelids.

He punched her savagely four times in the head, pulling her legs apart as she screamed. He ripped off her G string, and rammed his cock into her.

Suddenly there was an explosion of blue light and violent rocking of the car. He found himself uncoupled from the whore and pushed back against the seat. A blue, female figure was holding him down. He tried to push up, but she was incredibly strong.

He managed to pull his Glock pistol out of his pocket and he fired six rounds point-blank into the blue woman. The bullets passed through her, three of them piercing the windscreen, the others lodging in the car's panels.

The blue girl smiled at him.

Then a flame roared out of her crotch and he squealed like a stuck pig as his genitals were roasted into charcoal. The last thing Lucatelli knew was a burning sensation starting across his throat.

The two detectives jumped out of the squad car and ran for the Maserati, their service pistols drawn. They were greeted by the now familiar odour of burnt human meat.

Lucatelli had done his last drug deal. He sat transfixed in terror, dead as a dodo, Glock lying uselessly next to him on the seat.

'I'll go after the girl,' said Aldo. 'You see if you can find any others who might be witnesses.'

'Okay, boss.'

Aldo took off into the bushy area after the Nigerian girl. He went down a steep embankment beyond the stormwater ditch. He could see the girl

running awkwardly in her heels about fifty metres in front of him, amongst the trees and shrubs.

Suddenly there was a blue flash and he felt like he'd run into a tree trunk. He recoiled back a few steps.

A naked, blue, female form stood on the path in front of him. The image might have been somewhat ethereal, but he recognized Chiara Vecchio. Her ample breasts were heaving slightly, and Aldo couldn't help but notice her large, swollen, jade green labia. The pretty face smiled at him.

He cleared his throat. 'Sapphire. Or Chiara,' he said.

The apparition's lips didn't move, but a female voice entered his head. 'Either is fine. But now I'm the angel for these poor girls.' She just kept smiling at him.

Angel, or ghost, or whatever she was, Aldo couldn't help thinking that she was damned attractive. He had a flash thought wondering if it was possible to make love with a phantom.

The girl's smile broadened.

'Ooh, those are naughty thoughts,' said the female voice, with a seductive purr to it.

Hell, thought Aldo, she can read my mind.

'Yes, I can,' came back huskily.

He looked at her in silence for a minute. Her smile remained.

His inner detective returned. 'So, why do you kill some of the punters?' asked Aldo.

'Simple. If they hurt the girls, they die.'

Aldo nodded. He couldn't argue with that sentiment of justice. 'Fair enough. But how exactly?'

He could see the laugh on her face and hear it in his mind. 'Yes, I bet that has your people scratching their heads.'

'You bet, they haven't got a clue.'

'Watch,' she said.

A large rat emerged from a garbage bag under the bush to Aldo's right. It scampered towards Sapphire, as if she was magnetic. It stopped a metre away, head up, nose and whiskers twitching.

Aldo watched as Sapphire's labia glowed green and a huge blue flame shot out of her, setting the rodent alight. Then her eyes blazed and two searing blue beams converged on the rat's writhing body, cutting it in half.

She turned back to Aldo. 'Sorry, Inspector, you'll never get to solve this case. Not to your superiors' satisfaction, anyway. But at least you know the truth now.'

'Yeah. Frankly, I couldn't care less about what my bosses want. I've had enough and can't retire fast enough.'

'Maybe I can help you with that.'

He frowned at the unworldly, blue beauty.

'Before all your colleagues arrive, check the boot of the arsehole's car. But be fast. And be decisive. Goodbye, Inspector.'

And she was gone, just a blue haze left hanging in the chilly atmosphere.

Aldo shook his head to try and clear it.

Damn it, he'd never believed in ghosts. But now, either he was going insane, or he'd need to reassess his preconceptions.

He ran back to the Maserati. Piero was about fifty metres down the road, talking to a group of street girls.

He pressed the boot release. There were two sports bags sitting in there. He opened one. It was packed full of clear plastic parcels of white powder.

Shit, he thought, a few millions' worth of snow. He unzipped the second bag. Neat bundles of used notes completely filled it.

His decision took a mere instant. He closed up the money bag and transferred his new retirement fund to the boot of the squad car.

The following morning, Aldo walked into the outer office of his boss. The priggish secretary looked down her nose at him, as she always did.

'You don't have an appointment, Inspector.'

He smiled at her, whilst thinking what a obsequious little bitch she was. 'That's right. My resignation will only take a minute, though.'

She picked up the phone and spoke into it. She hung it back up.

'Go through.'

He looked at the pretentious, sour, little face, wondering whether a good fucking might actually create some sort of remotely human expression. He wasn't volunteering his cock, mind you.

He strode into Branchini's palatial office, industrious workshop of hot air and irrelevancies.

'Good morning, sir,' said Aldo as smarmily as he could.

'What's so fucking good about it, DiLernia?'

'It's my last morning of having to kiss your arrogant, incompetent, self-serving arse.' He smiled at Branchini and added, 'Sir.'

Aldo threw his resignation memo on the desk. 'I resign.'

Branchini was going beetroot in colour and starting to shake.

'You, you . . . '

'Save your breath, fuckstain. Just shove this job where the sun doesn't shine.'

Aldo threw his badge and gun on top of his resignation.

'The best bit for me, Branchini, is that I know you'll never solve these murders. And that blot on your record will ensure that you never, ever make it to Commissioner. The Mayor and his cronies will make sure of that.'

As Aldo turned to make his escape, Branchini roared in anger. Something heavy hit the inside of the door as Aldo closed it behind him.

Miss prim and proper looked up at him. He leant down over her desk.

'And as for you, why don't you get yourself some large cock to ride. Might make you fucking smile for a change.'

He walked out.

The bag from the Maserati had contained two million euros. Half of it was now packaged in two separate brown paper parcels, half a million in each.

Aldo met Piero at their local café to farewell his trusty sergeant. As he finished his espresso, he pushed

a plastic shopping bag over the table, with a brown parcel inside it.

'Don't ask, Piero, just enjoy. Ciao, my friend.'

'Thanks, boss. Good luck,'

Then on his way out of town in his loaded car, he stopped at the house of Mama Sophia, a former Nigerian street girl who now ran a welfare service to help the tide of newer girls on the scene.

'Inspector, always a pleasure,' she greeted him warmly, giving him a hug and a kiss on the cheek.

'Likewise, Mama. But I've left the police. Taking early retirement.'

'Oh, that's too bad. There aren't enough cops like you. Human ones.'

'Yeah, another reason to retire. Not the police force I joined any more. Anyway, a little something to help your great work, Mama.'

He passed her a shopping bag with the second brown parcel in it.

'Ciao, Mama.'

'Ciao, Inspector. And thank you.'

He got in his car and drove out of town onto the motorway. He headed south, for the Amalfi Coast and his cottage with its olive grove and small vineyard.

Four weeks later, a suntanned and supremely relaxed Aldo DiLernia walked back into his cottage, whistling happily and putting his shopping from the village market onto the kitchen table.

Odd. He thought there was a hint of a strange odour and the air seemed to have a slight blue tinge to it.

He looked in the sitting room and then the dining room. Nothing. His study was clear as well. He stepped into his bedroom.

On his bed lay Sapphire, naked and smiling. Not to mention glowing.

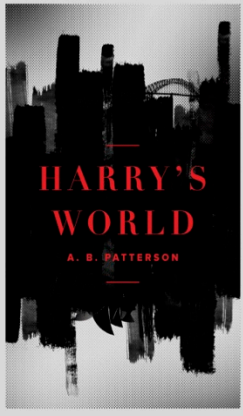
That sultry female voice entered his head.

'Hello, Inspector. Remember that naughty thought you had?'

Copyright © 2019 A. B. Patterson

**Hard-boiled pulp from the mean streets down under**

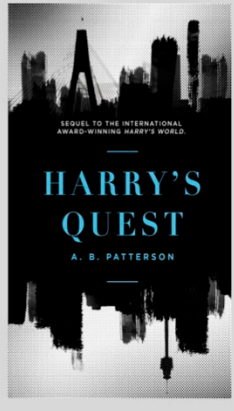
## PI Harry Kenmare




Sydney. Above - a beautiful harbour city. Below - sinful, seedy, and corrupt.
PI Harry Kenmare. A man who has lost everything. A man who is going to have his revenge.
He'll shatter the Establishment's hypocritical façades. And his way is far from pretty, unlike his women.

Reviewers' comments on the Harry stories...

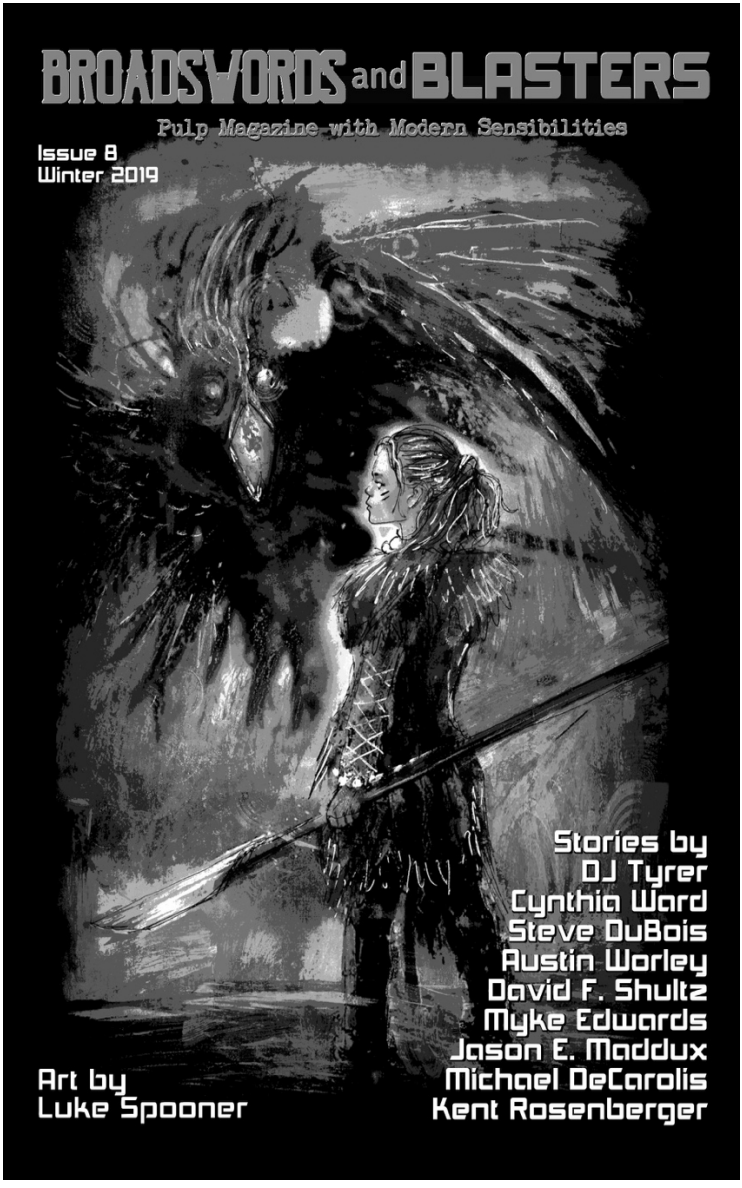
*"ballsy and literate, in the Chandler/Bruen style"*
*"sheer grittiness"*
*"humor and excitement"*
*"incredibly well written"*
*"not for prudes"*
*"raw, profane fiction"*
*"a private eye novel with real grit and drive"*




**From the pen of former detective sergeant A.B.Patterson**

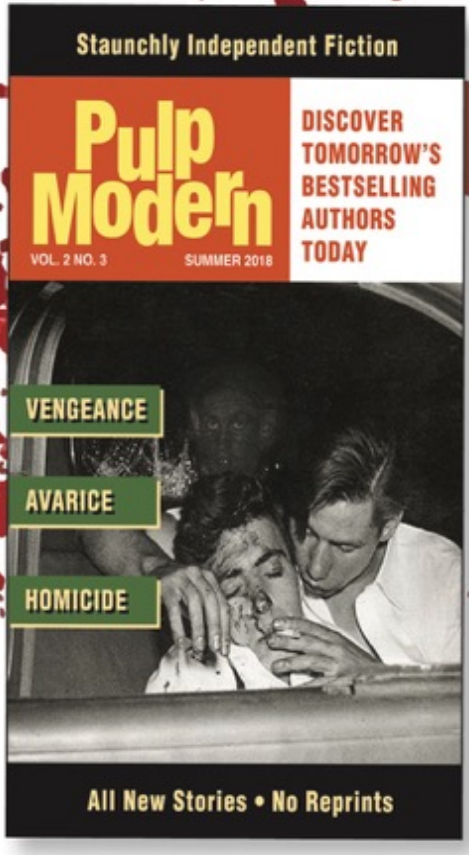
**www.abpatterson.com.au**

**Gritty, brutal, sexy, noir - Australian-style**


BROADSWORDS and BLASTERS
Pulp Magazine with Modern Sensibilities
Issue 8
Winter 2019
Stories by
DJ Tyrer
Cynthia Ward
Steve DuBois
Austin Worley
David F. Shultz
Myke Edwards
Jason E. Maddux
Michael DeCarolis
Kent Rosenberger
Art by
Luke Spooner

AN ANTHOLOGY OF NOIR
SWITCHBLADE
WOMEN OF NOIR
SPECIAL ISSUE
13 NO LUCK TALES FROM SOME OF THE
MOST PROMINENT WOMEN IN CRIME FICTION
IT'S ALL WOMEN
IT'S ALL NOIR
IT'S ABOUT TIME
STILETTO HEELED

# Take a ride with your new buds.



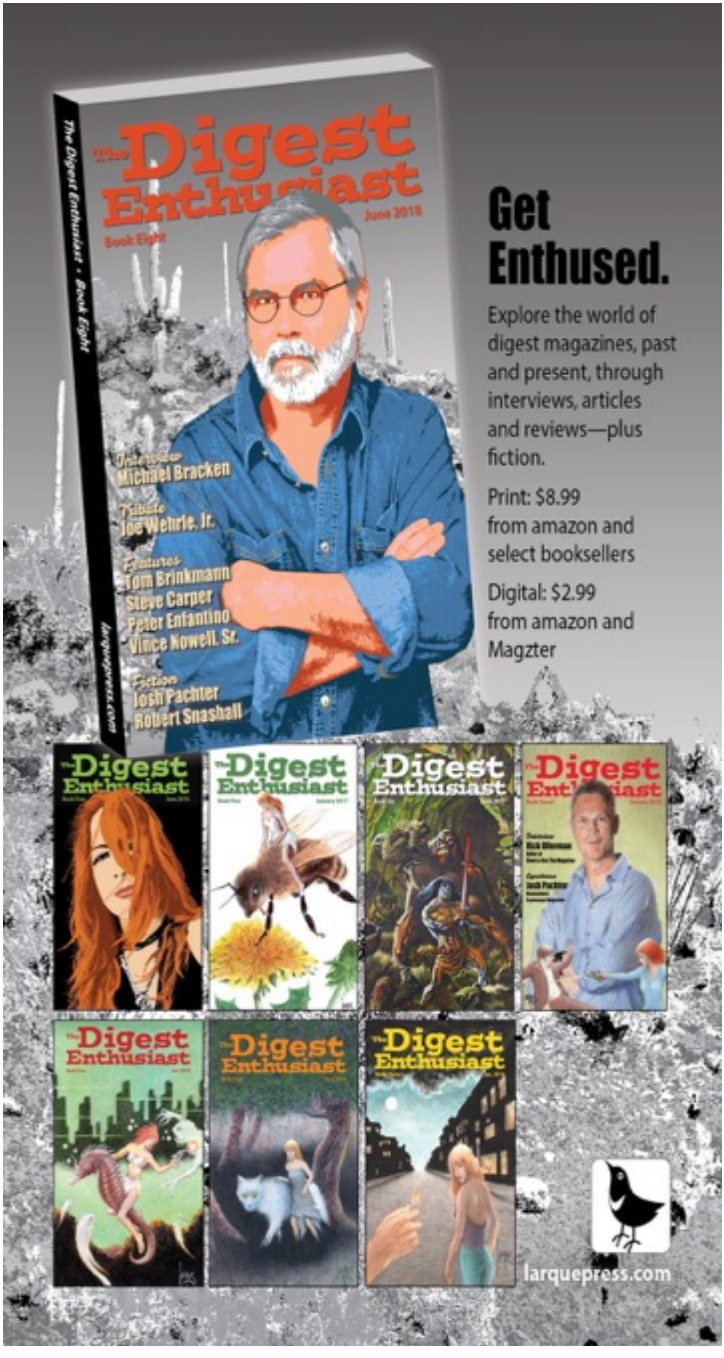

**Michael Bracken • Thomas Dade • John Kojak**
**Doug Lane • Chris McGinley • J.A. Prentice**
**Stephen D. Rogers • Scotch Rutherford • Cynthia Ward**

"THE MOST DISGUSTING THING I'VE EVER SEEN!"
- 2007 FRONTERAFEST PATRON

# TALL PINES LODGE

A NOIR PLAY

BY: J.D. GRAVES


The Digest Enthusiast
June 2018
Book Eight
Michael Bracken
Joe Wehrle, Jr.
Tom Brinkmann
Steve Carper
Peter Enfantino
Vince Nowell, Sr.
Josh Pachter
Robert Snashall
Get Enthused.
Explore the world of digest magazines, past and present, through interviews, articles and reviews—plus fiction.
Print: $8.99
from amazon and select booksellers
Digital: $2.99
from amazon and Magzter
larquepress.com

# CHEAP THRILL BIOS

**REX WEINER** is an editor, author and journalist. His stories and articles have been published in Vanity Fair, The New Yorker, Los Angeles Review of Books, The Paris Review, and Capital & Main, and Switchblade Magazine. His fictional stories about a detective working in the music business, serialized in the LA Weekly and New York Rocker in 1979-80, became the 20th Century Fox movie "The Adventures of Ford Fairlane." Collected in a book for the first time, "The (Original) Adventures of Ford Fairlane: The Long Lost Rock n' Roll Detective Stories" was published in 2018 by Rare Bird Books. He serves on the Board of Trustees of Beyond Baroque, the literary center, was a speaker at the 2018 Bouchercon, and is a co-founder of the Todos Santos Writers Workshop, headquartered in an old hacienda in a little town on Mexico's Baja coast. Website: rexweiner.com

**MATTHEW X. GOMEZ** maintains his web presence at mxgomez.wordpress.com as well as on twitter @mxgomez78. In addition to writing, he is one of the two conspirators running BROADSWORDS & BLASTERS, a new pulp magazine that debuted in 2017. Other work of his has appeared in PULP MODERN, STORYHACK, SWITCHBLADE, and in the anthologies MIDNIGHT ABYSS and ALTERED STATES II.

**MARK SLADE** appeared in weirdbook # 32, Switchblade #7, Southern Fried autopsies and other publications. I am the author of Blackout City Confidential and Book of Weird. My book Witch for Hire was accepted for publication by Close to the Bone. He writes and produces the audio drama Blood Noir for Para-X radio.

**HAILEY PIPER** was born obsessed with monsters, ghosts, and all things that go bump in the night. She writes horror stories to feed that obsession. Her work has appeared in Trickster's Treats, Five on the Fifth, and the horror anthology *Thuggish Itch: Devilish*.

**JON ZELAZNY** A graduate of Syracuse University and the U.S. Army Airborne school, JON ZELAZNY spent a decade in creative support of acclaimed film director Uli Edel. His stories have appeared in Thuglit, The Binnacle, Literary e-clectic, and Switchblade, and he's currently writing a novel about the British ballet.

**C.W. BLACKWELL** was born and raised in Santa Cruz, California where he still lives today with his wife and two children. His passion is to blend poetic narratives with pulp dialogue to create strange and rhythmic genre fiction. He writes mostly crime fiction, dark fiction and weird westerns. You can follow him on Facebook and Twitter.

**ROBERT PETYO** Robert Petyo's most recent crime stories have been published on the web at "Flash Bang Mysteries," "EconoClash Review," "Passage of Time," "Sky's the Limit," and "Trump Fiction." He has also published some science fiction in small press magazines, and in the deep dark past he wrote three science fiction novels under three different names. In his other life, he lives in northeastern Pennsylvania, is happily married, has three grown children and one adorable grandson. He can be reached at petyo@ptd.net.

**J.S. Rogers** She. has been writing since she could get her hands on a pencil and paper. These days, she writes as a freelancer for her day job and pens fiction by night.

**J.L. BOEKESTEIN** is an award-winning Dutch writer of science fiction, fantasy, horror, thrillers and whatever takes his fancy. He usually writes his stories in trains, coffeehouses and in the 16th century taverns of his native The Hague, the Netherlands. Over the years he has made his living as a bouncer, working for a detective agency and as an editor. His English publications include stories in: *Cyäegha*, *Nonbianary Review*, *Strange Shifters*, *Lovecraft after Dark*, *Surreal Nightmares, Urban Temples of Cthulhu*, *Sirens Call, Mystery Weekly Magazine, Double Feature Magazine, After The Happily Ever After,*

*Cliterature*, *No Safe Word, Sex & Sorcery 3* and *Brave Boy World: A TransmanAnthology*.
http://jlboekestein.wixsite.com/jaap-boekestein

**HATEBREAKER** has observed the world from the shadows and that caught on film and paper and have seen things provoking every possible emotion and how to make things able to do the same.

**A.B. PATTERSON** is an Australian writer of hard-boiled and noir fiction, usually crime. He is a former detective sergeant and government corruption investigator. He has published two novels with his hard-boiled hero, PI Harry Kenmare – *Harry's World* and *Harry's Quest*. He has had short fiction published in three issues of *Switchblade* magazine. He lives in Sydney and can be found on Twitter (plus others) and his website www.abpatterson.com.au.

**J.D. GRAVES** spearheaded the assemblage of all this mayhem. His stageplay, *TALL PINES LODGE* was an official selection of the 2016 New York International Fringe Festival. His other play *STANLEY AND JIM* played at the Manhattan Rep in 2009 to a total of two people. His short fiction can be found or is forthcoming in: *Mystery Weekly Magazine, Black Mask 4, Switchblade Issue 3 and 4 and 8, Broadswords and Blasters 6, Tough Crime 1, Penultimate Peanut, The Door Is A Jar, Intrinsick 2.0, among others.* He lives in the middle of the woods of East Texas with his wife and kids. Currently he's working on a novel and teaching. HE enjoyed feeding these salty words into this hungry machine.

Cynthia Ward
Cameron Mount
E.F. Sweetman
R. Daniel Lester
Aeryn Rudel
David Rachels
Die Booth
Adam S. Furman
Aristo Couvaras
J. Manfred Weichsel
ECONO CLASH review #5
Coming Late SUMMER 2019
EDITED BY:
J.D. GRAVES
QUALITY CHEAP THRILLS